



**IMPROVING EDUCATION BY  
DEVELOPING THRIVING LEADERS**

LESSONS FROM THE PRINCIPAL  
IMPACT COLLABORATIVE

*“Smart organizations today grow the capacity of their leaders to thrive. Why? Because depleted or disengaged leaders lack the energy, clear-headedness, and emotional balance to make the best decisions for their organizations and communities. Simply put: Thriving is an untapped power for leading with effectiveness and wisdom.”*

—RENEE MOOREFIELD, CEO, WISDOM WORKS GROUP

## **ABOUT WISDOM WORKS GROUP**

Wisdom Works was founded in 1999 with a clear mission to make thriving a standard of effective, sustainable leadership. The social enterprise works with companies worldwide, empowering brands, work cultures, and leaders to embrace and advance human thriving. To accelerate impact within organizations, Wisdom Works draws on its core brand Be Well Lead Well<sup>®</sup>, a science-based platform of wellbeing leadership assessments, bespoke programs, and culture change resources, backed by a growing network of practitioners around the globe. Demonstrating the belief that every company, large and small, can be an engine of wellbeing, Wisdom Works donates 1% of its gross revenues to inspiring causes that promote positive social change.

## THE ORGANIZATION

# PRINCIPAL IMPACT COLLABORATIVE

The Principal Impact Collaborative (PIC) is a U.S.-based organization with an inspiring mission: Improve outcomes for public school students by investing in bold, equity-driven, and resilient education leaders, such as principals (often referred to as headmasters in other parts of the world). PIC provides learning and growth opportunities for leaders in North Texas public school districts through training in design thinking, adaptive leadership, wellbeing, and resilience, along with peer networking and collaboration. Believing that the school principal is, according to PIC's *Empowering School Leaders to Thrive* report<sup>1</sup>, "the most important linchpin to creating a dynamic equilibrium between student and adult needs in schools," PIC has intentionally focused on increasing the ability of these leaders to thrive as a core part of their leadership development.

## THE CHALLENGE

# RAPIDLY DECLINING MORALE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Over five years ago, the organizers of PIC recognized that high turnover among urban public school principals (every 2.5 years on average) eroded long-term academic improvements, campus morale, and student outcomes. To meet these challenges systemically instead of superficially, they designed programs to support the development and retention of leaders in North Texas schools.

As these school leaders dealt with the unending disruptions and complexities of the pandemic, their morale and mental health declined, as it did for school leaders nationally. According to research by RAND corporation<sup>2</sup>, U.S. educators reported the lowest morale on record during the pandemic with 1 in 4 saying they planned to leave their role within a year. Additionally, RAND found that 92% of teachers reported their job as more stressful than before the pandemic and were nearly 3 times more likely to experience symptoms of depression than other professions. U.S. students were also negatively impacted by the pandemic; on average, they were assessed to be 5 to 9 months behind academically—a figure that grew when looking specifically at Black and Brown students.

Given the increasing hardships schools face, the path to recovery presented a challenging paradox for school leaders: They must rebuild the morale and wellbeing of their human capital, as well as themselves, to help students recuperate what's been lost academically.



## 5 BARRIERS TO LEADER WELLBEING

PIC identified five barriers to prioritizing wellbeing for school leaders. Wisdom Works sees these same barriers affecting leaders in organizations around the world.

1. Wellbeing has no consistent definition across the organization and/or it primarily focuses on physical health or self-care behaviors.
2. The leadership role is frequently about reacting to crisis after crisis, a "firefighting" stance which leaves leaders mentally, emotionally, and physically burnt out.
3. Personifying leaders as "superheroes," rather than human beings who are dealing with challenges and constant change, puts wellbeing and achieving outcomes at odds.
4. Support for leader wellbeing tends to be misaligned to leaders' needs or lacks follow-through.
5. There is an absence of differentiated and responsive pathways for the unique wellbeing challenges for underrepresented groups, such as Black and Brown leaders.

# INTEGRATING WELLBEING INTO LEADER DEVELOPMENT

All leaders today must navigate environments of contradictory demands, or paradoxes, where solutions are never clear or simple. At Wisdom Works, we believe leaders are better able to handle these paradoxes with adaptability and generativity in work cultures where human thriving is valued. Well before the pandemic, PIC realized this critical connection and responded by designing the principles and practices of wellbeing into their two-year, transformational program for public school leaders. At the time of publishing this *Be Well Lead Well*® Case Study report, the PIC program has engaged over 185 school leaders across the Dallas-Fort Worth area and is actively growing this leader network.

PIC's leadership program adopted the *Be Well Lead Well Pulse*® Framework of Thriving, an innovation by Wisdom Works, as its common definition of wellbeing (see page 8). This framework helped PIC leaders acknowledge that wellbeing isn't just about self-care. It emerges from the interplay of biological, physical, psychological, and social/cultural pathways which can be proactively tapped into and skillfully enhanced. Having this common definition of wellbeing empowered PIC leaders to explore what it means to prioritize thriving individually and collectively, seeing new avenues for effectively leading wellbeing in their schools for themselves, as well as for the teachers, parents, and students they serve.

PIC understood that the development of thriving, inclusive, and resilient school leaders was a cornerstone to fostering wellbeing in the educational ecosystem. As a result, PIC positioned wellbeing as strategic, incorporating it into their leadership development program through six interdependent elements.

*"We know an investment in leader wellbeing is a compounding investment in the social-emotional health of teachers and students. This is particularly true today, as pandemic-era stress, burnout, and depressive symptoms among teachers are significantly more likely to occur when they do not feel their wellbeing is supported by their administration."*

—ALEJANDRA BARBOSA, FOUNDER,  
PRINCIPAL IMPACT COLLABORATIVE

## PRINCIPAL IMPACT COLLABORATIVE WELLBEING APPROACH, 2021



## EMOTIONAL SAFETY & COMMUNITY

Similar to leaders in other industries, the tension between “achieving results” and “focusing on personal wellbeing” was evident for these school leaders. Consequently, from the beginning of the PIC program, leaders were asked to protect time in their schedules to focus on wellbeing. These leaders also engaged in a highly active peer-to-peer network, designed with a commitment to psychological safety which allowed them to be vulnerable about their wellbeing challenges and aspirations, plus deepen their learning and growth.

## IDENTITY & VALUES REFLECTION

As a vital developmental thread woven throughout the PIC program, leaders reflected on the often-hidden narratives driving them individually and how those strengthened or limited their capacity to thrive as leaders and whole people. Leaders were also guided to redefine leadership as *including*, rather than separate from, wellbeing; this helped them step into healthier, more sustainable ways of leading as they reconnected with their higher purpose and values.

## ASSESSMENT OF PERSONAL WELLBEING

At the start of the PIC program, leaders completed Be Well Lead Well Pulse®, Wisdom Works’ pioneering assessment measuring 19 psychometric factors that facilitate wellbeing and stress resilience. These are shared in a confidential feedback report as innovative, easy-to-use scores across six dimensions, or pathways to wellbeing (see page 8). In group sessions, leaders reviewed their personal assessment feedback scores and identified a dimension and potential actions for elevating their wellbeing. This not only offered principals a rare, holistic insight into their wellbeing; it also helped them discover ways that wellbeing was in their control, rather than dependent on outside factors.

## PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL & INTELLECTUAL PRACTICES

Wellbeing is so much more than self-care. A leader can miss out on vital pathways for thriving by focusing solely

on traditional wellness behaviors, such as eating well or exercising, and more specifically, by motivating these behaviors from a place of fear or “should” (i.e., “I *should* eat better”). Therefore, PIC leaders were encouraged to choose wellbeing practices that made sense for their values, heritage, and the narratives of thriving, resilient leadership they aspired to embody. As examples, leaders adopted practices for receiving and expressing gratitude, they engaged in meaningful dialogues to deepen relationships in their teams and families, they explored the role intersectional identity played in their wellbeing, and they experimented with new ways to bring healthier behaviors into their work-life routines.

## GOAL-SETTING ALIGNED TO PERSONAL VALUES

Each month, leaders selected one Be Well Lead Well Pulse® dimension to explore which aligned with their personal values. They then identified a short-term goal in that dimension and experimented with life-enhancing micro-actions they could easily integrate into their day; such as breathing techniques, building in time for daily reflection or deep thinking, and nurturing strong relationships. As they learned from these experiments, they chose how to turn those new behaviors into a sustainable part of their lifestyles and work routines.

## PEER SUPPORT & ACCOUNTABILITY

Throughout the two-year PIC program, full and half day workshops totaling 17 days focused on the wellbeing and leadership needs of each program cohort. A sample list of topics included: managing energy, increasing mindfulness and focus of attention, engaging in flow at work and home, bringing awe and wonder into leadership, and amplifying thriving across their campus cultures. During these sessions, leaders also held candid conversations about enablers and barriers to wellbeing with their peers, forging important relationships through a lens of wellbeing that now support them long after the program’s completion. Several program cohorts also created affinity groups on social media to publicly reinforce and celebrate individual and shared progress.

# THRIVING LEADERS STRENGTHEN SCHOOLS DURING A PANDEMIC

During a year of unprecedented change and upheaval, education leaders have been on the front lines dealing with increasing mental and physical health issues and equity gaps for students and teachers. Yet, while educators across the U.S. face the lowest morale on record, PIC principals reported less work-related stress and better campus morale; just as significant, they prioritized building a culture of resilience to help staff navigate the challenging road ahead.

Analysis of PIC’s program impact by researchers from the University of North Texas indicates that personal wellbeing is a key driver in overall leadership effectiveness. School leaders participating in PIC

demonstrated growth in several leadership abilities, including increases in overall confidence, ability to think innovatively when problem solving, willingness to take risks and try new things, and ability to advocate for the support they need. PIC principals also received higher supervisor ratings in overall effectiveness compared to non-PIC principals.

Overall, PIC leaders increased their leadership effectiveness, exercised greater autonomy to live and lead wellbeing, and generated a positive ripple effect impacting their teachers and students. By making wellbeing a priority, they achieved beneficial outcomes during a significantly challenging year.

## MAKING THRIVING A PRIORITY ENHANCES LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

By emphasizing personal wellbeing, PIC leaders saw a positive impact on key aspects of their leadership.

**86%**

reported greater awareness of their personal stress levels and wellbeing

**75%**

experienced less work-related stress

**83%**

experienced greater ability to think innovatively and creatively when problem solving

**81%**

were more likely to remain in their role

**81%**

felt more internally equipped to advocate upwards for the support they need from their school district

## CAMPUSES REPORT PIC LEADERS AMPLIFY A CULTURE OF WELLBEING

During a year with U.S. declines in teacher moral and perceived lack of support from campus administrators, PIC-led campuses continued to foster resiliency through a commitment to wellbeing.



of staff on PIC campuses felt their leader effectively role modeled the importance of wellbeing for staff.



reported positive leadership support to manage their personal stress levels and wellbeing.



said their leaders fostered a campus culture of resilience.

*Key insight of PIC impact analysis:  
Personal wellbeing is an essential driver of leadership effectiveness.*

# KEY LESSONS TO SUPPORT YOU

While PIC focused on leaders in the education sector, the lessons PIC gained are applicable for any organization that seeks to make thriving a strategy for developing effective leaders.

Are you ready to integrate thriving into your leadership, team, brand or organization? Consider these key lessons from the Principal Impact Collaborative:

- **Embed the concepts and practices of wellbeing into the broader challenges leaders face.** PIC found that supporting wellbeing is more successful when coupled with leadership development efforts targeting the most challenging aspects of a leader's role. A focus on wellbeing must meaningfully adapt to the evolving needs of leaders given the constantly changing environments in which they lead.
- **Set aside purposeful time and space where leaders can prioritize their wellbeing without guilt.** Creating and protecting the time for leaders to reflect, plan, and discuss their wellbeing enabled PIC leaders to see beyond the seeming paradox of "focusing on wellbeing" versus "achieving results." Instead, these leaders forged a new path to effectiveness: *Leading well through being well.*
- **Provide continual reinforcements to empower leaders to lead from wellbeing.** To help leaders achieve long-lasting results from the development program, PIC reinforced wellbeing mindsets and behaviors using a variety of means: a peer network and group sessions facilitated with the principle of psychological safety, 1:1 leadership coaching, short-term goals and micro-actions determined by the leader, the use of assessments such as Be Well Lead Well Pulse®, and experiences to explore the underlying mental models and values driving their identities.
- **Customize the design of every leadership development program—and the support of every leader.** Wellbeing is not "one size fits all." Through experimentation and frequent feedback, PIC learned that what enables thriving for one leader may not be what another leader needs to thrive. Utilizing the wellbeing dimensions and pathways offered by Be Well Lead Well Pulse®, PIC empowered leaders to personalize their experience, identifying relevant areas of focus and practices they could fully integrate within their lives and work.

## REFERENCES

1. *Empowering School Leaders to Thrive.* A report by the Principal Impact Collaborative, 2021.
2. Steiner, E. & Woo, A. *Job-Related Stress Threatens the Teacher Supply: Key Findings from the 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey.* A report by the RAND Corporation, 2021.
3. Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, Jimmy & Viruleg, Ellen. *Covid-19 and Learning Loss—Disparities Grow and Students Need Help.* A report by McKinsey & Company, 2021.
4. *Principal Development: Leadership Efficacy & Well-being.* A research brief by the Principal Impact Collaborative, Fall 2021.

# LEARN MORE ABOUT BE WELL LEAD WELL PULSE®



The Wisdom Works team believes creating a culture where wellbeing is valued is a mark of effective leadership. Be Well Lead Well Pulse® is the only instrument that provides you, as leader, the opportunity to explore 19 psychometrics of wellbeing in one setting and reported as 6 dimensions.

**THRIVING:** Evaluate your overall wellbeing today and in the future, as well as your ability to restore your wellbeing when you face difficulties or get off track.

**FUEL:** Proactively use your diet, physical movement, breath, and rest as tools for a sustained, balanced source of physical, emotional, and mental energy.

**FLOW:** Be in the zone—those times when you bring mindfulness and your full presence to the activities of life and work. You are intrinsically rewarded with energy, enjoyment, and a richer sense of how life unfolds with effortlessness and ease.

**WONDER:** Evolve worldviews through engaging in new experiences and challenges, embracing differences, and perceiving the beauty around you.

**WISDOM:** Tap into your inner greatness—the worthwhile purpose, higher vision, and innate genius you can use to guide yourself and others toward inspired impact.

**THRIVING AMPLIFIED™:** Bring forth more of your leadership potential to energize people, maximize their growth and capabilities, and cultivate a work environment of care.

## FEATURES OF BE WELL LEAD WELL PULSE®

- Designed for all levels of formal and informal leadership. It may also be used with teams, professional networks, plus organization-wide.
- Adaptable for augmenting your strategy to build a culture of thriving, as well as approaches, such as development and onboarding, to elevate your organization's leadership capability.
- Backed by a growing database of leaders worldwide.
- Part of a global movement for conscious leadership.

## READY TO THRIVE?

For more information or to find a Be Well Lead Well Pulse® Certified Guide in your region, contact us at [info@wisdom-works.com](mailto:info@wisdom-works.com).

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