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Research Article

## COVID-19 Crisis Management in Schools: A Look at the Skills and Practices of Québec's School Principals<sup>1</sup>

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**KEYWORDS**

crisis management  
school management  
professional skills  
educational activities

**ABSTRACT**

This article proposes to identify the various practices implemented by the principals of Québec's public elementary and secondary schools in order to ensure the academic and educational success of the greatest number of students during the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020. The analysis is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve school principals and vice-principals. The analysis of the results reveals practices related to budget and financial management, human resources management, leadership, planning and communication. The directors' and assistant directors' views on their crisis management practices are discussed in terms of the skills they need to develop during their training and throughout their career.

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**ARTICLE INFO**

Received: 5 September 2025 | Revised: 25 September 2025 | Accepted: 26 September 2025 | Published Online: 27 September 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65773/cr.1.1.21>

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this article is part of a 2020 research project on crisis management in schools. It uses ideas, data and excerpts from previously all French published scientific or professional publications. See Lemieux, Bernatchez and Delobbe articles in references.

## 1. Introduction

On February 27, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Québec. A school break begins two days later on February 29. This week-long school holiday happens towards the end of winter in all primary and secondary schools of the province. During this time, the population is highly mobile and people often use this time off to spend time with their families. This mobility in turn meant an acceleration of the contamination. The first public health measures—isolating travellers, banning large gatherings and encouraging teleworking—were ordered on March 11, 2020. A public health emergency was declared on March 14. In the days that followed, increasingly strict measures were enforced on the population: closure of the Canadian border and public spaces, including schools (March 16); closure of non-essential businesses (March 22); mandatory lockdown of the elderly (March 23); physical distancing measures (1 metre initially, then 2 metres) and travel restrictions between regions of Québec (March 27) [1].

As far as public health measures are concerned, the expertise of the INSPQ is called upon, but it is the Government of Québec, advised by public health experts, that makes the decisions. In the acute phases of a crisis, the executive—the Prime Minister, the Minister of Health, etc.—plays a leading role. In the realm of schools, everything is hither and thither. In March 2020, the Minister of Education invited students to enjoy an improvised school break before changing his mind a few days later and encouraging school staff to carry on education activities remotely [2]. This hesitation came across as improvisation and led to discontent among school staff and stakeholders [2].

Following this first wave of COVID-19, the lockdown was progressively eased from May to June 2020. Preschools and elementary schools outside of the Greater Montréal area reopened on May 11, but not secondary schools, where “virtual” schooling was maintained until the end of the school year in June. On June 16, the Minister of Education announced the reopening of all schools when the new school year would begin in September. Across Québec, wearing a face mask is made mandatory on July 18.

Faced with this unprecedented situation in the recent history of Québec, a number of players in the school environment wondered what practices should be implemented to ensure the continuation of educational activities in compliance with the new public health standards. In this respect, school principals emerged as key players in public health crisis management [3]. This article looks at the practices deployed by school principals in the context of a public health crisis. To do so, we draw on data collected in summer 2020 through semi-structured interviews with twelve Québec principals or assistant principals. The way principals and assistant principals view their crisis management practices are discussed in terms of the skills they needed to develop during their training and throughout their career paths [4].

## 2. At Issue

The function of school principal in Québec is marked by two historical figures: the denominational ancestor, namely the superior of a religious congregation, and the secular ancestor, namely the school principal [5]. Up until the Quiet Revolution, a period in Québec’s recent history characterized by the modernization of institutions and the liberalization of mores throughout the 1960s, authority in schools was distributed according to hierarchical status. During this period, however, the report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Québec (Parent Commission) laid the foundations for a new school system based on public, secular and democratic

principles. The role of the principal is dealt with in Volume II of the report [6, p. 137] : “The role of the school principal is currently ill-defined.” The Parent report suggests that “the Ministry of Education [also created on the recommendation of the Parent Commission] should (...) define the function of school principal” [6, p. 174], and states that this function should be entrusted to “a man of confidence to whom a great deal of latitude is given (...) [And whose primary role will] obviously be to organize teaching, monitor its quality and ensure its progress” [6, p. 175]. In the following years, however, the function defined itself through action rather than normative texts.

The vocabulary of school-related professions is a reflection of the ongoing changes. “Instituteurs” became “enseignants” and “principaux” became “directeurs” (NdT: in both cases, the English language does not have the same distinction as French does for those positions, but they are in line with the aforementioned public, secular and democratic principles) While the “principal”’s job is to supervise teaching and enforce discipline, the “directeur” (NdT: this is the meaning the word “principal” will use heretofore in this paper) is now more concerned with administrative management, a process-oriented task. It wasn’t until 1979, however, that the role of school principal was defined in the Education Acé, which governs Québec’s public school system, and that duties and powers were assigned to the function. The principal exercises these powers under the authority of the school board’s Director General<sup>1</sup>. The principal is responsible for the school and presides over its orientation and activities. They are accountable for their actions. The Education Act was amended again in 1988 and the function of principal is characterized by a duality between pedagogical and administrative management, recognized as such. School principals must balance these two dimensions [7].

Since the introduction of a number of reforms targeting all levels of education in Québec in the ’90s and 2000s, educational programs in Québec have adopted a competency-based approach. The concept of “competency” generally refers to a complex know-how that is deployed in a real-life context and constituted by combining elements of knowledge, know-how and interpersonal skills [8]. As a result, school personnel, including teachers and principals, are now required to develop and even implement competencies standardized by the Ministry of Education [8]. The Government of Québec puts forward two competency frameworks, one for the teaching profession [9] and the other for the school management profession [4].

To become a school principal or vice-principal, one must be an experienced teacher authorized under Section 23 of the Education Act, have the required qualifications and demonstrate an interest in the profession. In terms of teaching experience, a minimum of five years is generally required. Regarding skills, a minimum of 30 credits in graduate-level management has been required since 2001.

The competencies expected of teaching staff are set out in a competency framework [10]. The reference document on the competencies required to manage an educational institution [4], is the main framework for training of school principals. It is presented as a frame of reference designed to highlight the links between the competencies required to practise the profession of school principal, the domains in which these competencies are exercised, and the cross-functional skills underlying all of the required competencies. More specifically, the reference document lists ten competencies linked to four domains. It is therefore expected that, as a former teacher, the school principal—whose responsibilities include pedagogical guidance and supervision—will have mastered these skills. These domains and competencies are presented in the Appendix A.

Cross-functional skills are considered to be the common foundation of the various competencies and are required for school management. As such, they are necessary for the optimal mobilization of the competencies

<sup>1</sup> In 2020, the French-language “school boards,” the main intermediary bodies in Québec’s public school network, became school service centres (centre de services scolaire, CSS). The new denomination introduced other rules and standards that do not call into question the functions of this intermediary body, but it does, however, abolish the elected position of “commissioner” and, *de facto*, school elections.

targeted by the reference document and said competencies are structured around four domains of management. Those competencies are articulated around true work situations and are broken down as follows: 1) management of educational services; 2) management of the educational environment; 3) management of human resources and 4) administrative management. The competencies are presented in Appendix A. Although the reference document recognizes the “complex” and “uncertain” nature of the profession and the importance of knowing how to adapt to change, there is no mention of a principal’s ability to manage the various risks and crises that may arise in a school environment.

The extensive use of the concept of “crisis” in a large number of disciplines makes its actual meaning somewhat confusing. To distinguish it from certain other concepts that are more or less similar [11], suggests a severity scale:



According to this scale, a crisis would be more serious than an incident or accident, but still not a catastrophe, which is devoid of any positive aspect. Nonetheless, these four elements are all “risks,” which is to say hazards of varying probability, severity and acceptability.

The aim of risk management is to provide decision-makers with the tools they need to take risks, and even to rationalize and calculate this risk-taking based on the available data and the risk tolerance of the leader and his organization. A “crisis” is the manifestation of one or more risks following a triggering event. This manifestation kicks off a crisis that disrupts the organization because of its suddenness, uncertainty and impactfulness, which in turn generates many rapid changes as well as opportunities [11].

As for “crisis management,” it is “a management process aimed at preventing or mitigating the negative effects of crises by protecting organizations and various stakeholders, including the public, from various types of damage” [12]. It also aims to maximize its positive effects through various strategies and, above all, organizational learning, “a collective phenomenon of skills acquisition and development that, more or less profoundly and more or less durably, modifies the management of situations and the situations themselves” [13, p. 19]. Thus, the aim of risk management and crisis management is to get decision-makers to think about the possibility of crises looming over their organization, in order to prevent them and prepare their organization to deal with them [14].

While research in administrative and communication sciences have led to a better understanding and preparedness of crises phenomena [11,15-16], educational sciences had remained somewhat impervious to such research prior to the public health crisis provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, a few research papers have increasingly helped to define and drive this field [17-19].

This article adopts that perspective and looks at how principals and vice-principals viewed their crisis management practices during the first wave of the pandemic in Québec, and discussing them in terms of the skills they had to develop during their initial and ongoing training [4].

### 3. Methodology

The data collected through semi-structured interviews [20], with stakeholders (détenteurs d’enjeux) allows us to identify the practices deployed in a crisis context during the first wave of COVID-19 in Québec. It seemed to us that principals and vice-principals were the key players for conducting research on the political, administrative and

pedagogical issues involved in school crisis management, since they are responsible for ensuring that public health measures are respected in schools and the continuity of educational activities. They are also key players in the well-being of staff and students.

Our study focuses on the crisis management by principals in the public school network, since principals in the private network have greater political and administrative flexibility, making it difficult to compare both experiences [21]. Twelve principals and vice-principals of mandatory education establishments (pre-school, primary and secondary) took part in our survey. The profiles of the principals in our sample are varied: culturally homogeneous backgrounds, culturally heterogeneous backgrounds, advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table 1 presents a socioprofessional portrait of the participants.

Table 1. Portrait of the participants (n=12)

Characteristics	Number of participants
Gender	
Male	2
Female	10
Function during the crisis	
Principal	10
Vice-principal	2
Number of years of experience as a principal	
Less than 5 years	4
5 to 10 years	3
10 years or more	5
Academic level of the managed school <sup>a</sup>	
Primary	10
Secondary	3
Specialized school	1

<sup>a</sup>: Some of the participants were the principal of more than one school (n=2) or the principal of a specialized school for students aged 4 to 21 (n=1).

Table 2 presents a portrait of the characteristics of the schools managed by the participants.

Table 2. Profile of schools managed by school principals by academic level (n=15)

Characteristics	Primary (n=10)	Secondary (n=3)	Specialized (n=1)
Type of environment—urban/rural/suburban			
Rural	5	1	
Urban and suburban	5	2	1
Number of students			
Less than 250 students	5	2	
From 250 to 500 students	4	1	
From 501 to 750 students	2	0	
More than 750 students	0	1	
Reopening of the establishment's physical premises in the spring of 2020			
Yes	7	0	
No	4	4	

We developed an interview guide to identify the roles played by principals and vice-principals in the context of the COVID-19 crisis as well as the responsibilities they had to assume in collaboration with other school stakeholders. The semi-directed interview methodology employed is articulated around a verbal interaction guided by the interviewee's pace in a conversational mode [20].

More specifically, we developed a grid of preliminary questions based on various theoretical elements inherent to crisis management and school administration. The grid was tested with the heads of the three main professional associations representing school principals<sup>2</sup> in Québec and minor modifications were made to the grouping of questions. The questions put to the principals were designed to gather data on three main themes: 1) understanding of the school and its environment; 2) crisis management practices deployed by the principal; 3) roles and responsibilities of school players in times of crisis. This article takes a closer look at the results of the second theme. Appendix B presents the questions that were asked around that theme.

Recruiting participants was facilitated by the collaboration of the three main professional associations for public school principals who publicized the call for recruits in their newsletters. During the summer of 2020, the article's first author conducted all the interviews remotely using the Zoom videoconferencing platform due to public health constraints. The interviews were 90 minutes long, on average. The content of all interviews was listened to via Microsoft's Multimedia Player and synthesized into Word text documents by the second and third authors.

The analysis was carried out using a grid developed by the three authors which was based on the interview's main themes in order to bring out the representations of the political, administrative and pedagogical issues involved in crisis management in a school environment. The results of the observations were then collated by the first author, and discussed and validated by the whole team. This inductive type of content analysis consisted in

<sup>2</sup> These are former school principals. They play a representative role and are in regular communication with their members. They are the ones who speak on behalf of their members in the public arena.

“identifying similarities, i.e., similar structures or scenarios (patterns), or differences (...) in situations that are close, but not identical” [22, p. 48]. The research proposal was authorized by the Research Ethics Committee. Although rigorous, this research protocol is not devoid of limitations since participants may sometimes taint their responses due to social desirability [23], and the researchers’ analysis may also be tainted by unconscious biases. We do believe, however, that multiple perspectives (several participants and several researchers) help to reduce these risks and limitations.

## 4. Results

This section presents the practices used by the principals and vice-principals interviewed during the study to manage the public health crisis<sup>3</sup>. They are grouped into five categories: 1) budgetary and financial management practices; 2) human resources management practices; 3) leadership practices; 4) activity planning practices; 5) communications practices. These categories are based on the competencies to be developed according to competencies of school principals reference document [4].

### 4.1. Budgetary and Financial Management Practices

The principals interviewed stressed the importance of having access to the necessary financial resources to maintain health and safety within the school. This required quickly purchasing of material resources and accessing new budgets for staff remuneration.

There were several kinds of expenses linked to the purchase of material resources required by the pandemic: purchase of computer equipment, expenses linked to the printing of ministerial teaching kits and the purchase of equipment needed to continue in-person educational activities (health equipment and traffic organization equipment). Certain principals said they did not wait for a special budget to go ahead with these expenses. In this respect, several principals mobilized their communities to reduce costs or make up for certain shortages. Other principals convinced nearby companies to set aside such equipment for them and to prioritize their school’s supply over that of other companies or organizations in the region. As an example, here’s what Participant 12 said:

There was no Purell left anywhere. My principal found some while she was out getting her medication. A pharmacist helped her. We found Purell even though no one around had any. It’s nuts. Even this week, we were looking for Plexiglass (...). I called the nearby Costco and the man said “I don’t usually do this, ma’am, but I will set some aside for you”. It’s unbelievable how people can show solidarity and want to help us.

And since sharing objects (e.g., toys, balls) between students is proving complex, some principals purchased games so that students could personally use them safely during recess.

The crisis has also led to human resources-related excess expenses. This can be explained by the fact that several members of staff (e.g., employees at risk for reasons of age or health) are unable to carry out their duties and continue to be paid. In such a situation, management has to take hire new staff, which results in a duplication of salary. Compliance with public health standards can also require hiring new staff or increasing the number of work hours of certain staff members, whether it is, for example, to maintain the premises or to perform functions usually entrusted to volunteers who are unable to come to the school.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these practices have already been the subject of a non-scientific publication aimed at school principals during the first year of the health crisis (Lemieux, Bernatchez and Delobbe, 2020). For the first time, these issues are addressed from the standpoint of advancing knowledge.

## 4.2. Human Resources Management Practices

The principals we interviewed stressed the importance, in a crisis context, of preparing their school's staff and their network to be able to provide teaching either in class or remotely while also managing the public health crisis to the best of their ability. They argue that the human resources available inside and outside the school should be fully mobilized. There seem to be two specific ways to effectively mobilize available human resources around a common project during a health crisis. These are the recruitment of new staff and the redeployment of existing staff.

The opening of a majority schools in the spring of 2020 posed a number of challenges for those involved. They not only have to carry out their daily tasks, but additional tasks linked to the implementation and enforcement of public health measures as well. Staff sometimes even had to carry out janitorial tasks in classrooms and other common areas. This is why principals stressed the importance of increasing the number of janitorial hours whenever possible. A number of principals also hired new resources whose tasks are mainly related to supervising students, handwashing and accompanying them to the bathroom.

Moreover, the very context of a pandemic crisis could be extremely exhausting and anxiety-provoking for school staff. Several principals insisted on the importance of understanding and respecting their staff's needs, concerns and fears in relation to the public health crisis. To achieve this, they believe it is important to be reassuring to anxious staff members in order to preserve a good climate inside the school. Participant 5 expressed this well:

I told them, "I understand that for some of you, it gets in your fragility (...). Even if we're not naturally anxious, we've all become a little anxious at some point." Recognizing that and accepting that you're unsure of yourself ...It made people feel more confident.

Thus, in most of the situations expressed by principals, staff who are afraid to come to school are given tasks that can be carried out remotely (creating material, monitoring students remotely, etc.). On the other hand, a majority of principals said they have encountered little resistance regarding the redefinition of individual tasks and staff members generally understood that the crisis called for exceptional measures. When faced with resistance, principals believed they could overcome it by communicating to their staff the importance of these new tasks for the well-being and educational success of the students.

## 4.3. Leadership practices

The principals we met stressed the importance of exercising leadership during a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic in order to motivate and mobilize the entire school's team, to find solutions and make decisions, and to encourage teacher leadership.

As far as motivation is concerned, our analysis revealed two ways in which this can be achieved. They are related to the development of a sense of pride within the team and transparency on the part of principals. Several principals mentioned the difficulties they experienced in motivating and mobilizing their teams as they resumed their activities following the "two-week vacation" announced by the Minister of Education and Higher Education on March 13, 2020. They had to convince their staff that their help is invaluable. During the first few weeks, they relied mainly on volunteerism to avoid clashing with more resistant staff members. Then, little by little, they relied on their employees' sense of pride in their mission in society to overcome their fear of the pandemic. To motivate and mobilize their teams, several principals mentioned that they were fully transparent about the directives they have received from the authorities. Participant 2 declared:

Celebrate creativity, enjoy these moments (...), recognizing and promoting it by saying, “here’s what we did and it worked super well. Congratulations so-and-so.” It’s OK to rely on emotions a little and say, “See, we’re not working for nothing, we’re doing things the way they should be done.”

To motivate and mobilize their teams, several principals mentioned that they were fully transparent about the directives they have received from the authorities. For example, Participant 3 said:

We do a lot of work as a committee, with transparency, we inform people—I want people to be able to contribute (...). My takeaway from all these situations is that you absolutely must stay tightly knit with your employees (...). You absolutely have to be transparent and authentic.

Principals often communicate the directives they have received with their staff. Principals also find it important to communicate their feelings and worries. This promotes solidarity and cohesiveness in their team. They also point out that it is important to remain cool-headed about new directives and to project a calm and measured attitude. In other words, one must be transparent, but reassuring.

Principals also need to have a high degree of adaptability to manage crises. Certain principals mentioned the importance of being in “solution mode,” trusting the school team and not hesitating to delegate certain tasks. This way, the team comes together and principals can focus on implementing the new directives. We should also mention how important it is for principals to take the sometimes difficult decisions they have to make, and to take responsibility for them. They cannot show hesitation: once a decision is made, the school team must implement it and adjust, if necessary.

Finally, several principals insisted on the importance of fostering the leadership of the teaching staff in times of crisis. Principals working in a school where a collaborative structure is already in place find that this model facilitates their crisis management since the teaching staff is used to participate in decision making, working as a team and investing time in their professional development. This modus operandi facilitates team self-regulation while potentially reducing conflict between school staff members.

#### **4.4. Activity Planning Practices**

Obviously, the means to ensure the continuity of educational activities will differ whether they are conducted remotely or in person. A great deal of efforts must be deployed by principals to plan for the continuity of remote education activities during a pandemic. A number of challenges arise, including the organization of the work required to print and deliver the Ministry’s educational kits to students who don’t have access to the necessary materials. They must also ensure that students can safely retrieve school materials from school and plan for the retrieval of computer equipment for students who don’t have access to it at home.

The number of students without access to computers at home depends on the environment. When there aren’t many, principals manage to make up for this by lending the school’s equipment to students who need it. When, however, this number is high, they have to requisition that equipment. Principals also need to plan the schedules of online teaching. This can be quite complex since principals must, to the best of their ability, minimize scheduling conflicts with each student’s siblings since access to computer equipment at home is often limited.

Moreover, principals have to deploy considerable efforts planning the reopening of schools while respecting public health guidelines. For example, Participant 6 said:

When I make a decision, my plan is crystal-clear (...). We started dealing with the vagaries of everyday life and all these plans like the layout of the schoolyard, markings, school buses, we reorganized almost every childcare group group (...). We had to plan all that and who was in charge of what.

The layout of indoor and outdoor spaces required a lot of thought. To this end, several principals mobilized their communities. For example, they asked their municipality's administration to help them create new recreation areas close to the school or to redevelop existing areas using certain materials and accessories (fences, cones, etc.). One principal also asked first responders permission to use emergency exits in order to avoid bottlenecks. In some cases, the police department was mobilized to ensure that students from different groups did not gather when school was over. To be prepared for anything, some principals even simulated trips inside and outside their school alongside their school team. For example, they carried out minute-by-minute drills of the entry and exit procedures for students who are on foot or on a bus. They simulated the routes during lunch break, recess and toilet breaks. This way, they can avoid potential pitfalls and determine everyone's tasks more easily. Planning recess is a challenge in itself since objects cannot be shared. Some principals invited parents to bring their children's toys to school in plastic bags and these toys remained at school throughout the pandemic. If parents were unable to provide those objects, the school purchased some.

#### **4.5. Communication Practices**

During a public health crisis, principals need to stay in touch with the various people (staff, parents and students) who frequent the school by using the communication and information tools available in an optimal fashion. When schools closed, principals had to deploy considerable efforts to replace the formal and informal meetings with their staff, parents and students that were normally in person. This meant everyone had to get accustomed to technological communication platforms like Zoom or Teams. This appropriation of information and communication technologies was at the heart of crisis management to communicate with staff, parents and students alike. The role of principals was to foster this appropriation by every single staff member. Principals emphasized the importance of reassuring staff, parents, and students about the continuity of learning. To this end, they demonstrated they were listening to their concerns. Participant 4 said:

I was in charge of deciding to send a communication to parents, that's something I did not ask anyone to do. I'd send messages where I simplified certain directives that I thought were more difficult for parents (...). Sometimes I'd offer an English version (...), for certain elements that were more related to safety.

As far as the main means of communication are concerned, a majority of principals stuck to emails. Others opted to keep the school newspaper active as well or invested in the school's Facebook page to share information, but mainly to maintain and even foster a sense of belonging with families.

### **5. Conclusion**

Although our sample is limited to twelve school administrators, it reflects a noteworthy diversity in terms of school types (elementary, secondary) environments (urban, rural, suburban), and school sizes, allowing for a fairly inclusive portrait of administrative practices during the Covid. Since we present depersonalized data, it is impossible to make assumptions about the nature of the actions taken, the type of environment, or the profile of the administrators. Future studies using a quantitative design could address these aspects to provide further clarification.

The principles identified in this qualitative study align with the findings of Striepe and Cunningham [24] who, in their literature review on crisis management, highlight six characteristics of leadership in crisis situations: providing support, adapting roles, collaborating with various stakeholders, using diverse communication strategies, making complex decisions, and considering the context. Our findings also converge with those of various international studies that underscore the importance of transparent communication and emotional leadership in maintaining team cohesion during crises [25-27].

These convergences suggest that certain practices may be generalized on a broader scale, and even to crises beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, while still accounting for the local specificities and unique characteristics of each crisis [28].

The idea that the ability to manage a crisis is essentially based on personality traits specific to each individual, such as adaptability, resilience, a sense of responsibility, leadership, etc. Admittedly, there is a moderate positive relationship between the presence of certain personality traits and job performance, in general [29]. What's more, some of these traits—leadership, empathy or other affective traits—appear to be important for effective crisis management [30-32].

However, one cannot overlook the importance of developing knowledge, skills and competencies related to optimize effective crisis management [29]. Indeed, these characteristics—unlike personality traits, which are generally deemed to be stable in the individual and difficult to change—can be developed through experience or training activities [33]. While each crisis is specific and may require some specific knowledge or skills, general knowledge and skills related to crisis management are necessary to manage them properly [28,34].

Interviews conducted by Samir [35], with 15 people working in decision-making positions during Covid yielded interesting results regarding the factors influencing decision-making in times of crisis. According to their observations, the effectiveness of crisis management is influenced by various factors, including the presence—or absence—of professional skills related to crisis management.

The results of this study demonstrate the importance of focusing the training programs of school principals not only on the global skills associated with their day-to-day management, but also on a competency related to crisis management. While some of the skills listed in the principal's competency framework can be applied in a crisis management context, this context also requires other specific components or knowledge. As our results demonstrate, for example, principals need to adapt to contextual realities, plan ahead, anticipate needs and make decisions quickly. As various authors have pointed out [28,34], it seems important to develop, in people in a decision-making position, skills related to critical thinking, problem solving, and more specifically skills related to gathering information in the context of a crisis, analyzing, developing solutions, assessing needs and their possible consequences.

The results obtained through our interviews demonstrate the many decisions made by the principals in the context of this crisis, despite the directives emanating from the ministry or school service centres. While it's unlikely that principals will have to deal with a public health crisis on a regular basis, the school realm has multiple internal or external risks [15].

In light of this, it seems important to train principals to exercise leadership in the context of a crisis and, in so doing, to support the development of skills that will enable them to exercise this leadership optimally, such as effective communication, analyzing existing variable and needs, or anticipating the consequences. For this reason, the field of school administration can no longer remain impervious to research into risk management and crisis management.

## **Author's Contribution**

Anne-Michèle Delobbe : literature review, coding, data interpretation and discussion (33.3 %) ; Olivier Lemieux : literature review, data collection and interpretation (33.3 %) ; Jean Bernatchez : coding and data interpretation (33.3 %)

## **Publishing Ethics**

It should be noted that this article is part of a 2020 research project on crisis management in schools. It uses ideas, data and excerpts from previously all French published scientific or professional publications. See Lemieux, Bernatchez and Delobbe articles in references.

## **Funding**

PÉRISCOPE and UQAR

## **Data Availability**

For any inquiries regarding the protocols used or the data, please contact the corresponding author.

## **Conflict of Interest**

We do not have any competing financial interests or any personal relationships that could have had an impact on the work published in this article. There is no conflict of interest; this is only our original work, and all other materials used have been duly acknowledged in the text.

## **Ethics for the Use of Human or Animal Subjects**

To conduct this research involving data collection from individuals, we obtained an ethics certificate. CER UQAR : 2023-275

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Arianne Drolet for her support throughout this project. We also extend our gratitude to Périscope and UQAR for believing in this initiative, as well as to the head of the three main professional associations representing school principals and other partners who made participant recruitment possible.

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## Appendix A

### Competencies to be developed by school principals in Québec

Domain 1: management of educational services
C1. Structuring a school organization focused on the educational needs of students.
C2. Support the development of educational practices adapted to students' needs.
Domain 2: Management of the Educational Environment
C3. Assist the Governing Board in fulfilling its statutory role.
C4. Lead the development and implementation of an educational project <sup>4</sup> focused on the success of students.
C5. Support the development of collaborations and partnerships focused on the success of students.
Domain 3: Human Resources Management
C6. Ensure competent action in their practice and in that of each staff member.
C7. Ensure competent action of each of the school's working teams.
C8. Ensure the development of their skills and those of all staff members.
Domain 4: Administrative Management
C9. Manage financial resources effectively and efficiently.
C10. Manage material resources effectively and efficiently.

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<sup>4</sup> Following the adoption of Bill 105 in November 2016, the educational project has replaced the success plan (MEQ, 2022).

## Appendix B

Questions asked about crisis management practices and the preparedness of school principals to handle crises

Main questions	Secondary questions	Sub-questions
What management practices have you had to deploy in a crisis context to maintain educational activities or facilitate crisis recovery?	<p>What practices had positive effects on your environment?</p> <p>What practices could have a lasting effect on your environment or management practices in normal times?</p>	<p>What practices are related to budgetary and financial management?</p> <p>What practices are related to human resources management?</p> <p>What practices are related to leadership?</p> <p>What practices are related to activity planning?</p> <p>What practices are related to communications?</p> <p>What practices are related to dealing with ethical issues?</p>