

These Toronto schools are sharing a principal to save money - and parents say the move is hurting kids and teachers

Toronto Star | November 30, 2025 | Isabel Teotonio

At St. Florence Catholic School in Scarborough, parents Ray Chance and Sharon Avelino say it didn't take long to sense something was different this year with "half a principal" at the helm.

Emails take longer to get answered. Their three children rarely see the principal at school. And when issues arise during the day, they're not always sure who is in charge.

"It's no fault of hers," Avelino stresses, noting the principal is working hard to juggle the demands of two schools, two sets of staff and two parent communities. "It's just the situation."

This fall, the Toronto Catholic District School Board introduced a cost-cutting measure, used elsewhere across Ontario, in which one principal oversees two small elementary schools - six principals now lead 12 schools. But the shared-principal model is drawing criticism from some parents and educators who say it disrupts school operations, undermines student safety and strains staff.

In an email, the board said principals are "closely connected to both school communities throughout the day, ensuring they are easily reachable and able to respond quickly should a situation require their immediate attention." And this model "provides opportunities for increased collaboration between school and parent communities and for co-ordinated services and resources where appropriate."

How does principal-sharing work?

A principal is currently shared when two nearby elementary schools have a combined enrolment below the board's 350-student average. (Each of the 12 schools has a student population ranging between roughly 60 and 210 kids.)

"This approach helps ensure leadership continuity across both sites and supports efficient day-to-day operations," says the board.

In practice, principals shuttle back and forth, sometimes multiple times a day, or divide their schedule between mornings and afternoons, or alternate full days at each school. When they're off-site, they must formally delegate authority, but parents and teachers say it's not always clear who holds decision-making power.

"I feel like everyone suffers from our principal not being there," says Avelino, who with her husband co-chairs the parent council at St. Florence, which shares its principal with St. Gabriel

Lalemant, 2.7 kilometres away. "They say the principal is only a five-minute drive away, but you don't really know."

The board says it is "committed to ensuring every student has the support they need to succeed and that families continue to have their questions and concerns addressed quickly and effectively."

The model is not being considered at Toronto's public board, though administrators of alternative schools may oversee multiple sites.

How sharing a principal affects students and staff

Deborah Karam, president of the Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers, says the model undermines student safety, disrupts learning, and places an unfair burden on teachers. Without a consistent administrative presence, she says schools may struggle with student discipline, emergencies and day-to-day operations.

If a student misbehaves, they're typically sent to the principal's office. And during a classroom evacuation - when students are removed because a child in crisis is acting in a potentially harmful way - the principal typically manages the response.

"But if there's no principal, what do you do?" says Karam, who's heard of instances where no one was formally left in charge. And when a teacher assumes that role, she says it can pull them away from their class and increase their workload.

"Teachers are so focused on having to juggle so many things when the principal's not there," she says. "They can't focus on the teaching when they're burdened by all the administrative tasks sometimes."

The board approved the model in June, as it faced a \$48.5 million deficit for 2025-26. Paying six principals instead of 12 offers significant savings: on average, principals earn between \$144,000 and \$158,000 annually.

The current school pairings are: St. Luigi and St. Rita, Pope Francis and St. Francis of Assisi, St. Marguerite Bourgeoys and St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Bartholomew and St. Elizabeth Seton, St. Gabriel Lalemant and St. Florence, The Divine Infant and St. René Goupil.

Where did principal sharing in Ontario come from?

The practice of "twinning," where schools share a principal or other administrators, has traditionally been used in Ontario's rural settings, often linking a small and medium-sized school, according to a 1998 study in the Journal of Research in Rural Education. The model's benefits included cost savings, keeping small schools open and fostering staff collegiality. But researchers also noted the drawbacks: principals were often absent or hard to reach; smaller

schools felt overlooked; and administrators faced heavier workloads, juggling multiple council and staff meetings, concerts, evening events and travel between sites.

What began as a rural strategy is no longer confined to rural boards, says Ralph Sharples, president of the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario. Based on what he has heard anecdotally, there is an "increased reliance" on principal sharing across the province, which is a "concern."

"Being a principal is about relationships and instructional leadership - and being split between schools doesn't allow our principals to build those relationships with staff, caregivers, the local parish and the greater community," says Sharples. "It diminishes their role."

Several factors are driving the trend, he says. Schools with fewer than 125 students are not funded for a principal; the moratorium on school closures keeps under-enrolled schools open; and boards are struggling to recruit and retain administrators post-pandemic amid heavier workloads, rising school violence and feelings of burnout.

Although TCDSB trustees were largely stripped of their powers when the board and several others were placed under provincial supervision for financial reasons, Trustee Kevin Morrison still hears from frustrated parents.

"When schools are forced to share a principal, nobody wins, especially not the students," says Morrison. Principals are "community leaders" who are key to ensuring student success and building community, and they're "often the first line of defence for student welfare."

Splitting a principal between two schools "stretches them thinner" and is driven by costs "in the face of chronic underfunding and rising costs."

Having half a principal

At St. Florence, parents raised concerns in June but agreed to see how this year unfolded. So far, parents say the shift has been significant, particularly because the principal had been a steady, visible presence in recent years, greeting students at recess, lunch and dismissal. Chance says she now spends more time at the other school, where she's still getting to know staff and families, leaving St. Florence with less consistent leadership.

Parent council meetings, once held monthly, now happen every two months - another sign, he says, of how the school's administrative rhythm has changed. And when the school is short-staffed, the principal used to help cover absences. Now, with her off-site part of the time, he worries a skeleton staff is left to manage. He believes it might make more sense to consolidate the two schools than stretch one administrator across both.

"When she was there, it was running smoothly ... it was a better vibe," says Chance. Now, he adds, "we have half a principal."

