

“Champion” principals need inclusive action on violence, threats and record burnout levels

Under siege school principals have shown abiding dedication to jobs which expose them to frequent physical violence, threats and the highest burnout rates in a decade.

Brutal workloads, critical staff shortages, lockdowns and the spectre of Covid-19 have hit school leaders hard according to Australian Catholic University research that triggered “red flag” warning emails for one-in-three principals whose health and wellbeing were at risk.

STORY IN A TWEET

- Highest burnout rates in a decade for Australian school leaders
- 29% deemed “at risk” for mental health and self-harm
- Principals appeal for inclusion in policy development

In defiance of backbreaking demands, 82 per cent of educators who participated in the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education’s (IPPE) [*Australian Principal Occupational Health and Wellbeing Survey 2021*](#), reported increased connection with their school families.

“While confronting in many ways, school leaders have been champions of resilience, professionalism, and unyielding commitment to their school communities,” IPPE co-chief investigator Dr Theresa Dicke said.

“In times of crisis, they deliver, but for how long? Principals play a vital role in communities, so our overriding message is for the shameful treatment of our overburdened educators to stop.”

Now in its 11th year, the longitudinal study surveyed 2590 school leaders across all states and territories and made policy recommendations to both government and key stakeholders.

The feedback to IPPE investigators was bleak. Principals are sacrificing their long-term health for jobs that inflict on them unbearable stress.

Co-chief investigator IPPE Professor Herb Marsh said the soaring demands on school bosses were unsustainable.

“Principals and their deputies worked on average at least 55 hours a week. A quarter of those reported working more than 60 hours a week so it’s unsurprising the sheer quantity of work is the top stress factor,” Professor Marsh said.

“What the 2021 survey tells us is the younger and less experienced ones are reporting higher levels of stress than their more experienced peers.”

Among the aims of the project was the capacity to generate an immediate alert, or red flag, to survey participants reporting signs of concerning stress levels from at least one of quality of life, occupational health and self-harm risk.

KEY FINDINGS

- 44 per cent (5.7 times more than the general population) of school leaders were subjected to threats of violence
- 39 per cent (10.1 times more than the general population) were subjected to physical violence
- 29 per cent of school leaders received a “red flag” alert email
- Burnout (physical and mental fatigue) and cognitive stress levels were the highest since the survey started in 2011.

After an easing of stressors while so many schools were under Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, more principals triggered red flag alerts in 2021 than in the first year of the pandemic. Of those who received red flag emails, four-in-10 were aged 31-40.

“Principals and their deputies have given blood above and beyond what’s expected of the role,” ACU investigator and former principal Dr Paul Kidson said. “They’ve revealed an unbreakable backbone and a commitment to care for their students, staff and communities.

“More than 40 per cent were threatened and four-in-10 were subjected to physical violence, the second-highest incidence since the survey’s inception in 2011. At this rate, half of all school leaders will endure physical violence by 2025.”

Table: 2021 Offensive behaviour by parents and students towards school leaders by state and territory, compared against the general population.

	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	ACT	NT	per cent
Sexual Harassment	0.7%	1.3%	1.8%	0.9%	3.4%	3.1%	0.0%	0.0%	
Threats of Violence	37.2%	32.8%	51.6%	45.0%	47.9%	53.1%	65.5%	61.8%	
Physical Violence	32.5%	29.4%	43.9%	46.8%	45.8%	43.8%	62.1%	61.8%	
Bullying	20.8%	14.4%	17.6%	24.8%	14.7%	25.0%	34.5%	29.4%	
Unpleasant Teasing	5.4%	3.4%	4.2%	5.5%	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	8.8%	
Conflicts and Quarrels	35.2%	31.5%	35.5%	36.7%	34.9%	37.5%	34.5%	38.2%	
Gossip and Slander	24.9%	18.1%	31.3%	30.3%	27.3%	43.8%	20.7%	29.4%	
Cyber Bullying	27.1%	20.7%	32.8%	30.3%	25.2%	40.6%	37.9%	23.5%	

The compounding stresses on educators could be addressed by a more inclusive and empathetic approach to policy development.

Retaining talented and developing school leaders is a priority but there are initiatives in place to support current and future principals.

ACU's Graduate Certificate in Mental Health for Teachers and Educators is an online course aimed at lowering stress and reducing burnout in schools.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

There are 14 key recommendations in the report, including:

- Develop and implement coherent national teaching workforce training, supply, retention and remuneration policies and practices.
- Engage directly with principals on reducing job demands or increasing job resources.
- Support local schools in the community.
- School leaders must respectfully speak back and take responsibility for their personal work-life balance.
- Provide high quality longitudinal evidence of the different impact of variables associated with our education systems and its stakeholders.
- The steadily increasing offensive behaviour must stop.

Australian Primary Principals Association president Malcolm Elliott said the survey data should be the catalyst for meaningful, systemic change.

“The time is long overdue for governments to welcome to the table those who have the most workable ideas for how to re-design a cracked system – the principals,” he said.

The survey report is available here: <https://healthandwellbeing.org/report>

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