

Principal mental health suffers amid escalating threats, violence, and chronic staff shortages

Escalating threats and violence, punishing workloads and chronic staff shortages have hit school principals hard with an alarming 47.8 per cent triggering “red flag” alerts in 2022, new Australian Catholic University research shows.

ACU’s annual Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey 2022 shows one in two school leaders are at risk of serious mental health concerns including burnout and stress.

Offensive behaviours towards principals have also escalated in the past year with 44 per cent of principals subjected to physical violence – the highest figure recorded since the survey started in 2011.

Figures compiled by ACU’s Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (IPPE) for the latest annual survey of 2500 Australian principals reveal “red flag” alerts jumped by 18.7 percentage points last year – a 64.26 per cent increase.

Red flag alert emails are triggered when school leaders are at risk of self-harm, occupational health problems or serious impact on their quality of life. The emails alert principals to contact employee support services.

Special school principals fared the worst with 56.3 per cent triggering red flag emails in 2022. Government school principals closely followed with 51.8 per cent compared to 35.3 per cent of their Catholic, and 27.7 per cent of independent school counterparts. The percentages were higher for female principals across all sectors.

Principals in the Australian Capital Territory triggered the most alerts with 58.5 per cent of school leaders identified to be at risk of serious mental health concerns. However, Northern Territory (57.4), New South Wales (55.7) and Western Australia (52.2) were nearly as high.

The marked jump in threats, physical violence and cyberbullying against principals saw ACT principals report the highest rate of physical violence and/or threats from students at 80.5 per cent, followed by NT (75.5), WA (57.2), Tasmania (55.9) Queensland (51.7), NSW (46.6), SA (43.3) and Victoria (32.8 per cent).

Researchers found parents and caregivers were responsible for one third of threats of violence. Conflict and quarrels ranked high across all states and territories.

KEY FINDINGS:

- **An alarming 47.8 per cent of principals triggered “red flag” alerts in 2022**
- **One in two school leaders is at risk of serious mental health concerns including burnout and stress**
- **Special school principals are most at risk with 56.3 per cent triggering red flag emails**
- **Offensive behaviours escalated in the past year with 44 per cent of principals subjected to physical violence**
- **ACT principals reported the highest rate of physical violence and/or threats from students at 80.5 per cent**
- **Heavy workloads, lack of time and teacher shortages driving principals to resignation and early retirement**
- **The number of principals wanting to quit or retire early has tripled in one year.**

ACU Investigator and former principal Dr Paul Kidson said school leaders were now 11 times more at risk of experiencing physical violence in their workplace than the general population.

“Enough is enough. Our research shows abuse and intimidation towards principals and the associated health risks suffered by school leaders continues to grow and it must stop,” Dr Kidson said.

“Such a significant shift in red flags warnings in a short space of time suggests the situation is more serious than first thought. For the past 12 years we have looked at trends and this year they are stark – the scale and the rate has intensified, and we are seeing a severe escalation in stress levels.”

Offensive Behaviour by parents and students towards school leaders by state and territory, compared against the general population.

TABLE 3.1.3: 2022 PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL LEADERS REPORTED BEING SUBJECTED TO OFFENSIVE BEHAVIOUR BY STATE

| | NSW | VIC | QLD | SA | WA | ACT | NT | TAS |
|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Sexual Harassment | 2.5% | 1.3% | 2.5% | 1.3% | 2.2% | 9.8% | 4.1% | 2.9% |
| Threats of Violence | 46.2% | 38.8% | 53.7% | 41.3% | 55.5% | 75.6% | 69.4% | 55.9% |
| Physical Violence | 43.9% | 31.3% | 46.9% | 36.7% | 55.0% | 73.2% | 71.4% | 38.2% |
| Bullying | 37.0% | 27.9% | 31.5% | 36.0% | 33.2% | 36.6% | 51.0% | 29.4% |
| Unpleasant Teasing | 10.6% | 9.4% | 8.1% | 13.3% | 11.8% | 9.8% | 14.3% | 8.8% |
| Conflicts and Quarrels | 60.1% | 53.1% | 65.7% | 70.7% | 59.8% | 51.2% | 61.2% | 73.5% |
| Gossip and Slander | 52.4% | 38.8% | 56.7% | 56.0% | 47.6% | 43.9% | 59.2% | 38.2% |
| Cyber Bullying | 31% | 25% | 39% | 30% | 27% | 34% | 24% | 26% |

The latest revelations follow the release of early survey findings showing heavy workloads, lack of time and teacher shortages were driving school principals towards resignation and early retirement, with the number of principals wanting to quit or retire early tripling.

Burnout, stress, anxiety, depression, and alcohol and/or drug use were their top five sources of concern for staff. For students, principals were most worried about anxiety, school refusal, depression, stress, self-harm, and bullying/victimisation.

World leading educational psychologist and co-lead investigator Professor Herb Marsh, who has been at the helm of the report since 2016, said it was a sobering look into the mental health of our nation’s school leaders.

“They are weighed down by the compounding crunch of unsustainable workloads, chronic teacher shortages and concern about mental health issues among staff and students,” Professor Marsh said.

“The wellbeing of our school leaders is at a tipping point and increasing numbers of principals may not be able to do their jobs. If this happens, their absence will seriously limit the achievement of national educational priorities and policies.

“There is an urgency in our call for action as the time to redress these concerns diminishes. We may see a mass exodus from the profession, and the implication for Australian education would be devastating.”

In addition to ongoing workload and staffing issues, principals also appear to be wavering in their dedication to their jobs as they grapple with the highest rates of burnout, sleeping troubles, stress, and depression in a decade.

Principal workloads are increasing – with an average working 56 hours a week – while job satisfaction, mutual trust between employees and trust in management have plummeted to the lowest levels since the survey started highlighting the stressful school cultures they are working in.

IPPE co-lead investigator and leading school wellbeing expert Associate Professor Theresa Dicke said more structured guidelines were needed to stamp out the growing abuse against principals.

“We acknowledge these challenging problems and that state and federal governments have implemented some measures to support school leaders, but this survey shows that principals don’t feel these initiatives go far enough,” she said.

“They still feel heavily burdened by the demands of their jobs and their responses to the survey questions show more needs to be done.

“Political leaders and education experts have united to form the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, so we know there is a precedent for a collaborative effort aimed at improving principal health and wellbeing, but it would be even more effective with more principal-specific initiatives and the ongoing support to implement it.”

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

There are 15 key recommendations in the report, including:

- Government to fast-track review and elimination of low-value tasks advocated by the Productivity Commission and develop strategies to enhance teacher wellbeing
- Employers to introduce wellbeing priorities within performance frameworks for school leaders and develop a culture of trust
- Professional organisations to seek feedback on how to best support members and continue advocacy on recommendations from the Productivity Commission and National Teacher Workforce Plan
- Principals to take responsibility for personal work-life balance and seek support when needed.

Dr Paul Kidson, Associate Professor Theresa Dicke and Professor Herb Marsh are now available for interview. The report is under embargo until 12.01am on Monday 20 March.

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