

# Violence escalates and mental health suffers but principals remain resilient

**School leaders have reported high levels of resilience despite facing the worst recorded levels of physical violence, threats of violence, and bullying in the 13-year history of ACU's annual *Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey*.**

World leading educational psychologist and co-lead investigator Professor Herb Marsh, who has been at the helm of the report since 2016, said school principals were remarkably resilient, but increasing job demands and burnout are putting them at risk.

"It is deeply concerning that offensive behaviour towards school leaders and teachers persists and appears to be on the rise," he said.

Despite the spike in violence and the toll on their mental health and wellbeing, the survey found school leaders showed surprisingly strong levels of resilience, and their work commitment remained high.

Compiled by ACU's Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (IPPE), the latest survey of 2300 principals reveal instances of physical violence increased 76.5 per cent since 2011.

It also showed school leaders suffered higher rates of anxiety and depression than the general population, with early career school leaders most at risk.

Offensive behaviours towards principals escalated in 2023, with 48 per cent subjected to physical violence and more than half (53.9 per cent) experiencing threats of violence. Of those reporting physical violence, a staggering 96.3 per cent was at the hands of students.

Heavy workloads and a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning remained the top two sources of stress for principals surveyed in 2023. Mental health of students, followed by mental health of staff and student-related issues round out the top five sources of stress.

The survey also shows more than half of school principals intend to quit or retire early. Experienced school leaders, with over 15 years behind them, are leading the charge to get out.

There is also concern about mid-career leaders turning their backs on long-term principalship, with almost 60 per cent of those with six to 10 years' experience wanting to leave the profession.

"Assuming only half of those who agreed or strongly agreed to quit acted on this response, there would be an exodus of more than 500 school leaders – the data strongly suggests this would be experienced school leaders," Professor Marsh said.

Professor Marsh said school principals needed credible proactive feedback about their sources of stress, resilience, and mental health – independent of state departments of education and other regulatory bodies.

ACU investigator and former principal Dr Paul Kidson called on education ministers to urgently take collective action to address the significant threats facing principals.

"We've had a national spotlight on teacher education and workloads, disruptions in the classroom, campaigns to boost the profession's status, and a continued focus on students' mental health and academic outcomes – all noble and necessary," Dr Kidson said.

"Principals are being asked to do more with less. It's been over a decade since the Gonski Review, and we still do not have full funding based on student needs. It is naïve to think this does not translate into the increasing stress among school leaders today."

IPPE co-lead investigator and leading school wellbeing expert Associate Professor Theresa Dicke said despite mounting challenges school leaders showed extraordinary dedication, commitment, and commendable resilience. Australian Catholic University has specialists who can comment on news matters relating to their area of expertise. Please direct requests to ACU's [Media Team](https://www.acu.edu.au/media-enquiries) at [acu.edu.au/media-enquiries](https://www.acu.edu.au/media-enquiries).

“But every year we call for more to be done. There is an urgency for education ministers to prioritise responding to the data in this report,” she said.

She called for a national summit to coordinate strategies and resources to ensure issues facing principals are in focus.

“Otherwise, many of them will act on their intention to leave and it will make achieving important policy initiatives very unlikely.”

**KEY FINDINGS:**

- **The top five sources of stress include the sheer quantity of work, lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, mental health of students, mental health of staff, and student-related issues**
- **One in five school leaders reported moderate to severe depression, with early career school leaders showing greater levels of anxiety while others are at risk of serious mental health concerns, including burnout, stress, and trouble sleeping**
- **An alarming 42.6 per cent of school principals triggered a “red flag” email in 2023, signalling risk of self-harm, occupational health problems, or serious impact on their quality of life**
- **More than half of school leaders (53.9 per cent) reported threats of violence**
- **Nearly half (48.2 per cent) reported physical violence, up from 44.0 per cent**
- **Of those reporting physical violence, a staggering 96.3 per cent was at the hands of students.**
- **Threats of violence from parents/caregivers is still high in 2023 at 65.6 per cent**

Percentage of participants from each state and territory reporting offensive behaviour in 2023.

	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA
Sexual Harassment	4.7%	3.9%	5.9%	4.3%	3.6%	3.2%	2.0%	3.0%
Threats of Violence	72.1%	49.8%	61.8%	62.3%	42.9%	65.1%	39.7%	60.7%
Physical Violence	65.1%	44.1%	64.7%	54.5%	40.2%	50.8%	35.4%	55.4%
Bullying	39.5%	40.4%	38.2%	38.3%	39.3%	36.5%	33.3%	40.6%
Unpleasant Teasing	9.3%	13.0%	8.8%	11.9%	16.1%	6.3%	6.1%	13.1%
Conflicts Quarrels	53.5%	57.4%	50.0%	64.3%	65.2%	60.3%	57.6%	68.1%
Gossip & Slander	46.5%	56.1%	58.8%	61.7%	58.9%	34.9%	47.1%	51.7%
Cyber Bullying	20.9%	40.2%	23.5%	39.1%	31.3%	41.3%	25.9%	34.2%

**Friday 22 March 2024**

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Recommendations in the report include:

- **Calling on the Education Ministers Meeting and sectoral leaders in all states and territories to prioritise support for school leaders**
- **Empowering school leaders with decision-making autonomy and providing dedicated resources for reducing unnecessary tasks, building on concerns highlighted by the Productivity Commission**
- **Addressing inappropriate behaviour from parents/caregivers to maintain a safe and conducive learning environment. The Victorian School Community Safety Order stands as an example of a mechanism that can be reviewed and refined for better outcomes.**

Dr Paul Kidson, Associate Professor Theresa Dicke and Professor Herb Marsh are now available for interview.

**ACU media contacts:** *Elisabeth Tarica* on 0418 756 941 or [elisabeth.tarica@acu.edu.au](mailto:elisabeth.tarica@acu.edu.au) or *Mary Papadakis* on 0448 491 059 or [mary.papadakis@acu.edu.au](mailto:mary.papadakis@acu.edu.au)