

MEDIA RELEASE

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Critical incidents taking a significant toll on school leaders – study

More than 80 per cent of Australian principals have experienced critical incidents in their schools including violent security threats, mental health crises, suicide attempts and medical emergencies, new Australian Catholic University (ACU) research shows.

And most school leaders feel the frequency of critical incidents – serious, significant and unexpected events that threaten the normal school environment – is increasing.

School leaders have described the toll of dealing with the largely “high” or “extreme” severity critical incidents as leaving them feeling weighed down, stressed, anxious, unsafe, unsupported, burnt out, and struggling.

Study Chief Investigator Associate Professor Theresa Dicke, of ACU’s Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (IPPE), said the research painted an alarming picture.

“The data and comments from school leaders highlight serious and significant fears about the increasing nature and severity of critical incidents in schools and the ongoing capacity of burdened school leaders to continue to have the resilience to deal with them,” Associate Professor Dicke said.

The *Understanding Critical Incidents: Empowering Australian School Leaders* report, based on survey data from 351 Australian principals, found:

- Most school leaders experienced one or more critical incident (81.5 per cent), with more than half (50.4 per cent) dealing with two or more, and just 18.5 per cent not experiencing a critical incident during their time in leadership.
- More than 70 per cent of reported critical incidents were categorised by school leaders as being of “high” or “extreme” severity.
- Tasmanian and Western Australian school leaders reported the most “high” or “extreme” severity incidents.
- School leaders in Western Australia reported the highest experience of multiple critical incidents, with Victoria second highest in the one or more critical

incident category, and Tasmania second highest for experiencing two or more critical incidents.

- Victoria scored highest on the percentage of participants who have experienced one critical incident.
- The most common incidents reported were security threats (21.2 per cent), followed by mental health crises (12.3 per cent), suicide threats or attempts (10.8 per cent) bullying (10.8 per cent), and medical emergencies (9.9 per cent).
- Most school leaders felt “not prepared” or only “somewhat prepared” to deal with critical incidents (57 per cent).
- Almost 67 per cent of respondents experienced cumulative trauma due to multiple critical incidents without a chance to recover, adversely impacting on their mental health and family relationships.
- All participants said changes or improvements were needed to better support school leaders manage critical incidents.

Separate data from ACU’s most recent annual *Principals Health & Wellbeing Survey* also showed almost 74 per cent of 1878 respondents experienced a critical incident, most commonly violence and security threats (43.9 per cent), student and community deaths (14.9 per cent), suicides or suicidal threats (12.6 per cent), and medical emergencies (10.3 per cent).

Fellow study Chief Investigator and former school principal Dr Paul Kidson, of ACU’s School of Education (SoE), said school leaders reported that factors including poor mental health, parental abuse, Covid-19 fallout, social media, and worsening community attitudes towards school staff had contributed to critical incidents.

“While 42.3 per cent of participants felt they coped ‘very well’ or ‘extremely well’ with each of these critical incidents, this resilience masks the true picture,” he said.

“School leaders also reported that too many incidents are not only severe, but that they feel under-prepared, under-supported, and under pressure to deal with them in highly stressful urgent atmospheres.”

Associate Professor Dicke said the research, funded by the Principals Australia Research Foundation, emphasised the need for better support systems to help school leaders manage critical incidents. She called on all state and territory governments to act, including adopting key recommendations from the report.

“School leaders have been emphatic in calling for changes and improvements to better support school leaders in managing critical incidents, both during and afterwards,” she said. “But they cannot do it alone. They need significant systemic support to create meaningful change.”

Key recommendations from the research, which was also conducted by Professor Herb Marsh and Dr Chloe Gordon, of IPPE, and Professor Amanda Telford, of the SoE, include having a standardised incident response roadmap, in-house psychological support, improved communication with emergency services, better training, more timely assistance, and time off without stigma for school leaders after critical incidents.

Conducted in partnership with the Tasmanian Principals Association (TPA), the research also put a spotlight on that state, finding 85 per cent of school leaders had experienced at least one critical incident, while more than half had experienced two or more.

The most common incidents reported by Tasmanian school leaders were security threats (28 per cent), suicidal threats or attempts (16 per cent), medical emergencies (12 per cent), bullying (11 per cent), and mental health crises (8 per cent).

Nearly three-quarters of Tasmanian school leaders (72.3 per cent) ranked incident severity as “high” or “extreme”, while 56.6 per cent rated themselves as “not prepared” or only “somewhat prepared” to handle incidents.

The ACU researchers backed the TPA in its advocacy for systemic improvements to deal with the higher prevalence of security threats and mental health incidents faced by Tasmanian school leaders, including implementing better training and a triage system for post-incident support.

Some of the quotes from school leaders contained in the report:

“And there just seems to be more knife incidents, and more violence happening within schools. So, it's becoming commonplace... We need to do something about that, because we want our schools to be safe places to be.”

“...when it comes to critical incidents, the system is not set up to actually support key players. You are literally on your own, until it becomes an issue for the system itself. It is truly a disgraceful situation.”

“I think the issue is compounding trauma, and compounding stress... it's just ongoing.”

“I find my sleep is often interrupted at 3am with ruminating or catastrophising over the incident or incidents.”

“Incidents keep cropping up and I jump from incident to incident. It is the accumulation of demands and the lack of resources that wears me down. I'm 11 years into principalship... I won't make 20.”

“Things aren't getting better. It's not fun being exposed to this stuff every day, not without the supports in place.”

“Parents being violent at school, striking people within the school grounds. I've had students bring weapons to school with the intent to use them.”

Understanding Critical Incidents: Empowering Australian School Leaders

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