

# Principals navigate growing challenges as anxiety, depression increase and violence, workloads intensify

**ACU's latest survey of Australia's principals sounds a dire warning with school leaders reporting worsening levels of anxiety and depression as they continue to face high levels of physical violence, threats, and bullying.**

Yet despite the spike in violence and the toll on mental health and wellbeing, the survey found school leaders showed surprisingly high levels of job satisfaction, and their work commitment remained high.

The *Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey* is compiled by ACU's Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (IPPE).

IPPE co-chief investigator and leading school wellbeing expert Professor Theresa Dicke said the latest report compared the experience of school leaders who reported high levels of job satisfaction with those experiencing low levels of job satisfaction.

Not surprisingly, those with low job satisfaction have higher levels of anxiety and depression and a much higher intention to quit (82.3 per cent). Queensland school leaders recorded the highest intention to quit while ACT had the lowest.

"Both anxiety and depression have worsened but there has been a reduction in participants reporting severe depression," she said.

"We need all school leaders to find their work satisfying, helping those who do not is now even more urgent given they are the ones likely to leave. Violent and threatening behaviours are taking an unfair toll on the committed and dedicated leaders and reduce the ability for schools to be positive environments focused on student learning."

World-leading educational psychologist and co-chief investigator Professor Herb Marsh, who has been involved with the report since 2015, said Australia risks losing an entire generation of school leaders without urgent reforms.

"Workload, violence, and mental health challenges continue to escalate," Professor Marsh said. "However, despite this adversity, school leaders have maintained high levels of resilience and commitment; their professional dedication is to be applauded."

More than half (53.2 per cent) of principals surveyed signalled an intention to quit – the figure jumped to 82.3 per cent for those with low job satisfaction. A higher percentage of people who signalled an intent to quit and low job satisfaction reported severe anxiety.

The latest survey points to a substantial reduction in experienced school leadership which will exacerbate existing teacher shortages and create a nationwide leadership vacuum, placing further strain on an already overburdened education system.

It also reveals instances of physical violence increased 81.6 per cent since the survey started in 2011. Threats of violence is also at its highest since inception.

Offensive behaviours towards principals escalated in 2024, with 49.6 per cent subjected to physical violence and more than half (54.5 per cent) experiencing threats of violence. Of those reporting threats of violence, 80.4 per cent were 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 2024. Student related issues, followed by mental health of staff and mental health of students round out the top five sources of stress.

ACU educational leadership expert and former school principal Associate Professor Paul Kidson said the survey showed too many school leaders were battling unsustainable workloads and conditions that would not be tolerated in other workplaces.

Associate Professor Kidson warned the success of policies like the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement relied on continued support across all jurisdictions.

“This latest report unambiguously highlights that the satisfaction principals feel in their job must be front and centre of any strategies to improve conditions for school leaders and, in turn, the teachers, education support staff, and students who rely on them,” he said.

He said Federal Education Minister Jason Clare’s commitment to a National Principal Reference Group following the release of last year’s survey results was an “outstanding success” that needed to continue.

“Depending on what happens with the Federal election, whoever forms government will need to have a resolvable commitment to this cause as many principals feel we’ve finally started moving in the right direction, and we can’t afford to lose that momentum,” he said.

#### KEY FINDINGS:

- The top five sources of stress include heavy workloads, lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, student-related issues, mental health of staff and mental health of students round out the top five sources of stress
- An alarming 45 per cent of school principals triggered a “red flag” email in 2024, signalling risk of self-harm, occupational health problems, or serious impact on their quality of life
- More than half of school leaders (54.5 per cent) reported threats of violence – the highest figure recorded since the survey started
- Nearly half (49.6 per cent) reported physical violence
- Bullying (37 per cent), conflicts and quarrels (63.4 per cent) also spiked
- Parents/caregivers as sources of cyber bullying has become high at 87.6 per cent
- Of those reporting physical violence, a staggering 95.5 per cent was at the hands of students
- Threats of violence from parents/caregivers was 63.7 per cent, down from 65.6 per cent the previous year.

e	Sexual Harassment	Threats of Violence	Physical Violence	Bullying	Unpleasant Teasing	Conflicts & Quarrels	Gossip & Slander	Cyber Bullying
---	-------------------	---------------------	-------------------	----------	--------------------	----------------------	------------------	----------------

ACT	5.1%	74.4%	69.2%	35.9%	7.7%	61.5%	56.4%	25.6%
NSW	3.0%	47.3%	39.0%	40.0%	10.3%	58.4%	51.1%	33.6%
NT	5.3%	71.1%	73.7%	21.1%	13.2%	65.8%	60.5%	21.1%
QLD	5.6%	58.9%	54.6%	38.7%	11.0%	68.0%	62.4%	44.1%
SA	2.8%	55.9%	56.6%	37.2%	14.5%	70.3%	60.0%	36.6%
TAS	3.5%	59.6%	49.1%	26.3%	8.8%	61.4%	50.9%	42.1%
VIC	2.4%	46.2%	41.3%	29.4%	10.5%	60.5%	54.5%	29.0%
WA	4.5%	62.4%	58.5%	38.2%	10.9%	64.5%	61.2%	33.9%

### **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Recommendations in the report include:

- Calls for the government and employers to address heavy workloads as the number one source of stress by providing autonomy, resources, support and intensifying efforts to reduce administrative burdens
- Prioritise wellbeing support for school leaders
- Consider alternate school leadership models such as co-principalship
- Address inappropriate behaviour from parents/caregivers towards leaders and staff to maintain a safe and conducive learning environment by implementing mechanisms such as the Victorian School Community Safety Order.

Read the full report here: <https://healthandwellbeing.org/principal-reports>

Professor Theresa Dicke and Associate Professor Paul Kidson are based in Sydney and are 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)

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://acu.edu.au/media-enquiries) at [acu.edu.au/media-enquiries](https://acu.edu.au/media-enquiries).