School principals say violence is normal in their jobs

By Lucas Walsh, Christine Grice, Jane Wilkinson and Tim Delany



Principals' jobs have always been stressful, involving a constant juggle to meet the needs of students, staff and the community. But research suggests their roles are becoming more difficult and increasingly unsustainable.

In a 2024 survey of Australian school leaders from all types of schools, 50 per cent reported they had been subjected to physical violence. The same survey reported physical violence incidents had increased by 81.6 per cent since 2011.

In our new report we investigate violence in Australian schools and the impact on school principals and the emotional demands of their jobs. This is part of a broader four year-project into how to prepare and support principals for their complex roles. Editor's note: The report can be accessed here.

Our research

Between July 2023 and October 2024, we asked Australian public school principals to contribute short, anonymous testimonies about a critical incident (a sudden, emotional and often traumatic event) at their schools.

Principals were recruited via principal association newsletters, teacher union newsletters and social media. A key aim was to provide the opportunity for principals to speak about the emotional management aspects of their work in their own words.

We received 298 testimonies (both written and verbal) from 256 principals across primary and high schools.

Another normal day

The testimonies showed violence – both generally in school communities and specifically directed at principals – is disturbingly routine. As one principal recounted, "that's just another normal day at school for me". A male teacher in a rural school told us: "I was assaulted [several] times on one day by a [new] student who was violent."

Others described being hit and bitten by students. More than half of respondents in our research (65 per cent) described a critical incident involving physical violence, threats of violence and/or gendered violence, sexual harassment or sexual abuse towards principals or others within the school.

Principals faced threats from students, parents and community members. Almost a third (29 per cent) described a critical incident involving inappropriate behaviour from a parent.

For example, a female teacher at a rural primary school described how a parent harassed her after their child had been suspended for hitting another child.

“A parent verbally abused me, [damaged] my car, took photos of my number plate and posted it on social media,” she said.

Do what I say

This level of violence inevitably harms school principals’ mental health and their ability to stay on in their demanding jobs. The principal who had her
number plate posted online told us she became extremely frightened and stopped sleeping:

“I was anxious about being out in the community, fearing that someone was going to attack me.”

Another principal “had a recurring dream that I was shot in the head” after dealing with aggressive parents, who made threats. Principals also described checking when driving they are not being followed by certain parents.

Our testimonies also echo other research which finds women principals are far more likely to be the victims of attacks from students or parents. This included being stalked and intimidated, both verbally and physically.

One female principal recounted how a male community member said to her: “Do what I say bitch. I own you; this town owns you.”

Not enough support

A major theme across the testimonies was a lack of support for principals handling violent or traumatic incidents in the school community. While they were supporting staff, students and parents, there was no one to support them.

More than one third of principals (34 per cent) were critical of their state or territory education system’s response in the aftermath of a critical incident.

One female principal in our study noted, “I had to fake how I was truly feeling so as not to look weak”.

One male principal from a rural high school described how he struggled after supporting his school through deaths in their community.

“This was the most complex and hardest work I have ever done […] people need to realise that principals are humans too […],” he said.

How can we help?

Our report found despite the stresses and violence they are facing, principals are helped by peer support, which enables them to share expertise and feel less isolated.

This support includes clinical programs where groups of principals meet with a social worker to talk through incidents and issues. Or social workers do one-on-one debriefing after difficult incidents.

However, our findings also suggest we also need to look beyond individual, psychological supports.

Our report recommends states and territories explicitly acknowledge the psychosocial risks (elements that can cause psychological harm) in principals’ job descriptions. This is to make these issues visible and ensure employers’ responsibilities to principals are clearly understood.

Our report also recommends an expert review of occupational health and safety in schools and a national summit on violence in schools. Using these, we could develop a national plan to reduce violence against school leaders and other school staff.

Violence in schools is neither inevitable nor acceptable. Without systemic change, the sustainability of public education –

and the wellbeing of those who lead it – is at risk.

Read more: Emotional burden carried by principals uncovered.

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