New research uncovers the emotional burden carried by public school principals

The Australian Education Union (AEU) has welcomed new research from Monash University that exposes the extreme and often invisible emotional demands placed on Australia's public school principals, and is calling for urgent government action to address the escalating risks to their health, safety and wellbeing.

The national study, *Invisible Labour: Principals' Emotional Labour in Volatile Times*, paints a stark picture of a profession under immense and unsustainable pressure, with principals reporting significant negative impacts including insomnia, nightmares, physical illness, trauma and symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said the research confirms what principals, teachers and unions have been warning governments about for years – that principals are facing growing psychosocial hazards including violence, burnout and emotional exhaustion that are not being adequately acknowledged or addressed.

"This research shows that Australia's public school principals are serving as first responders, crisis managers, counsellors, community leaders and administrators, often all at the same time and often without the support, resourcing or recognition they need," she said.

"The emotional toll described in these testimonies is devastating. No principal should be left 'juggling 10 chainsaws', as one Queensland principal put it, while supporting their entire school community through trauma."

The Monash reports identify intensifying emotional labour, much of it unacknowledged in policy frameworks, as a core and escalating risk in the principalship.

Ms Haythorpe said the findings should act as a catalyst for immediate government action.

"Principals are carrying the emotional load of a deeply underfunded system. They are supporting children with increasingly complex needs, while navigating rising levels of
violence, distress and social volatility. It is morally indefensible for governments to ignore the human cost of this crisis," she said.

"If we want strong, stable and thriving school communities, we must protect the people who lead them.

"We urge all governments to work with principal associations and unions to ensure principal wellbeing is embedded in legislation, policy and funding, including through the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement."

AEU addresses the undervaluation of cultural skills

The UTS Centre for Indigenous People and Work (CIPW) and the Australian Education Union (AEU) have joined forces to address the historical and contemporary challenges faced by "Indigenous employment".

This groundbreaking partnership, supported by Maurice Blackburn Lawyers, aims to develop a Leading Practice Bargaining Framework to support the AEU's anti-racism campaign. The collaboration builds on these organisations' long-standing leadership in Indigenous employment reform.

The framework will embed anti-racism measures within industrial and professional conditions, recognising that safe, respectful and inclusive workplaces are fundamental employment rights.

This collaboration builds on the AEU and the UTS Jumbunna Institute's earlier joint work*Making our words and actions meet: Understanding the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators in the workforce*. That report benchmarked the experiences of Aboriginal member and Torres Strait Islander member experience within education facilities and identified practical industrial and organisational reforms, including proposed enterprise bargaining clauses.

The partnership comes at a critical moment following the Fair Work Commission Expert Panel's provisional decision in early 2025, which recognised gender-based undervaluation across several priority awards, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services Award 2020.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said: "Aboriginal teachers and education staff and Torres Strait Islander teachers and education staff bring essential cultural knowledge, leadership and care to our schools, early childhood services and TAFE institutes, yet this work has long been undervalued and overlooked in industrial systems."

"By placing anti-racism and cultural recognition squarely within bargaining frameworks, we are asserting that respect, safety and equity are core employment conditions, not optional extras."

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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