Facing the Facts on improving teacher and school leader wellbeing



For more than a decade, teachers and school leaders in WA have carried a growing burden of expectations, complexity and intensification. *Facing the Facts: A Review of Public Education in Western Australia* made this reality impossible to ignore, finding that educators increasingly feel undervalued, disrespected and exhausted as workload and student complexity surge. The core message was blunt: the profession is at breaking point and system level reform - not individual resilience - is the only sustainable path forward.

This message is echoed powerfully in *Understanding and Reducing the Workload of Teachers and Leaders in Western Australian Public Schools* by Viviane Robinson and Peter Hamilton. Their analysis shows that workload intensification is not the product of a single cause but the cumulative impact and relentless nature of proliferating tasks, expectations and compliance requirements.

They emphasise that the expansion of teachers' and leaders' core work - coupled with increasing behavioural, wellbeing and mental health demands - is now so significant that the fundamental viability of the job must be questioned. The report warns: "whether the job of teaching as currently performed and organised is doable and sustainable" is no longer a rhetorical question.

The Public Sector Commission's *Agency Capability Review* of the Department of Education reinforces this diagnosis from a system governance perspective. It notes that central and regional supports have not kept pace with rising student complexity and disadvantage, and that organisational structures remain too centralised and remote for many schools' needs.

The review highlights the lack of clarity around system priorities, accountability and how leadership across levels works together to deliver them - creating ambiguity and pressure that ultimately flows directly into schools.

It stresses the need for a coherent vision, stronger capability and an organisational structure fit for purpose in a significantly more demanding environment.

Taken together, these three bodies of evidence - *Facing the Facts*, the PSC review, and Robinson and Hamilton - present a clear, convergent thesis: educator wellbeing is a system responsibility, not an individual failing. Efforts that focus solely on

personal resilience will continue to fall short if the system itself remains misaligned, under resourced and operationally fragmented.

So what must the public education system actually do?

First, it must dramatically strengthen localised staff, behavioural support and specialist services so schools are no longer expected to compensate for gaps in mental health, disability, youth services and family support. Second, workload reduction must become an explicit system priority: unnecessary compliance, documentation and processes must be systematically identified and eliminated, not merely acknowledged. Third, strategic coherence must be restored. Fewer, clearer priorities - supported by aligned resourcing, implementation support and transparent monitoring - would reduce the churn and policy volatility that erode morale.

Finally, school leaders and teachers must be meaningfully involved in shaping system culture, strategy and expectations; their voices cannot remain peripheral to the design of the very system they are expected to lead and sustain.

Improving teacher and leader wellbeing is not a matter of asking or helping educators to be more resilient. It is about designing a system that no longer depends on heroic individual effort to function. The evidence is clear - and the responsibility sits squarely with the system to respond.

Recently principals have been offered the band-aid of a dedicated wellbeing budget. Fair enough, but that doesn't address the systemic and cultural drivers that impact on their wellbeing and that of their staff. A recent report from Monash, Deakin and the University of Sydney - *Invisible Labour: Principals' Emotional Labour in Volatile Times* – had one principal use the telling metaphor of "juggling 10 chainsaws". Is there anyone in the frontline in schools not feeling this burden?

It's time to face the fact that reactive responses to wellbeing concerns do not stem the tide or address the causes – that would require seriously addressing workload intensity, job design, Department culture, school and performance review, and human support for school leaders and teachers as an inherent part of the public education system.



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