Principals experiencing violence, threats and stress in their schools

By Paul Kidson, Herb Marsh and Theresa Dicke



Almost half of surveyed Australia's school principals face physical violence in their jobs [according to the latest*Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey*]. Almost 90 per cent say they encounter offensive behaviour from students, parents and even colleagues.

The latest instalment in [the] annual survey of Australian principals shows how their exposure to aggression risks becoming normalised in schools.

Principals also report they work an average of 54 hours a week. They say the sheer quantity of work is their biggest source of stress. As one principal from a Catholic high school told us, "This job is getting harder every year".

What can governments and education systems do to help?

Our research

Since 2011, our study has collected the experiences of 2,000–2,500 Australian school principals per year.

This is now the 15th year of the study and over that time, 8,100 individual school leaders have completed at least one survey. This includes principals as well as other senior teachers, such as deputy principals.

Respondents come from primary and high schools around the country, and across the public, private and Catholic sectors.

Given there are less than 10,000 schools across the nation, this is a strong sample of the people who lead our schools.

When this many leaders speak, we should listen.

Reports of violence are growing

In 2025, nearly half of school leaders reported being subjected to physical violence. Almost 54 per cent experienced threats of violence. Students were the most common source of physical violence, while parents were the main source of threats.

These reports have increased significantly since the survey started in 2011. Rates of violence at this magnitude would be considered unacceptable in many other professions.

Meanwhile, almost 90 per cent of respondents say they are subject to some form of unacceptable/offensive behaviour in their jobs. This includes physical threats, sexual harassment, unpleasant teasing, cyberbullying and gossip.

As one primary school teacher told us: “When I became a principal I didn’t expect to be mired in managing adult behaviour. I thought it would be about instructional leadership and inspiring educators. I didn’t realise how I would be subject to manipulation and need to respond like a lawyer – with extreme care and explicit language which leaves no room for interpretation.”

What else did we find?

School leaders continue to work long hours, averaging 53.9 hours per week during term and 19.6 hours during holidays. This is well above an average working week in Australia (about 38 hours). There has been some reduction in reported hours worked. In 2011, 27 per cent of participants reported working 60 hours or more, which has reduced to 22 per cent in 2025.

Unsurprisingly, principals report mental health issues and plans to leave their jobs:

- Twenty-five per cent scored at least a “moderate” rating for anxiety and 23 per cent scored at least a “moderate” rating for depression.
- Fifty-four per cent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I often seriously consider leaving my current job”. This is up slightly from last year.

As one respondent from a private high school told us: “The challenges of reduced funding, combined with growing expectations from all stakeholders make it more and more difficult to meet the demands of the role […] I am not sure how this will be sustainable for the next generation of principals.”

New rules for schools

Across the life of the project, we have seen important changes to try and improve conditions for principals.

The Victorian, Queensland, and NSW governments have introduced programs to reduce administrative loads, and public campaigns have tried to build community respect for the teaching profession.

Some states have developed programs to support aspiring principals.

The NSW government has introduced legislation to address aggressive parental behaviour, similar to Victorian laws. This will mean those who have engaged in threatening or abusive behaviour can be banned from coming within 25 metres of a school.

What else do we need?

But clearly more needs to be done to improve the conditions for school leaders.

In 2011 we also saw the release of the Australian Standard for Principals, which sets out what principals are expected to “know, understand and do to achieve in their work”.

It is time to review this.

Our last three reports show student and teacher mental health have become acute sources of stress for principals – this should be reflected in a revised standard. There is not one mention of teachers’ mental health throughout the document, despite it now consistently ranking as a top source of stress for principals.

And much has changed in our wider society. Since the standard was published, we’ve had a royal commission on child abuse in school settings, Covid-19 and a growing understanding of the need to manage young people’s healthy use of screens.

It’s time to honestly and openly acknowledge the life of the school principal has radically changed – and update our expectations and support.

We know principals have a huge influence on the culture and expectations of a school. So their welfare matters, not just to principals and those who aspire to these jobs. It is also vital to families who value their children’s education and governments who rely on education for our national good.

Editor’s note: To view the *2025 Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey*, click here.

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