New survey reveals record level of school violence

School leaders have reported high levels of resilience despite facing the worst recorded levels of physical violence, threats of violence and bullying in the 13-year history of the annual *Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey*.

Western Australia was ranked third in the nation in terms of states and territories where principals were most likely to report physical violence, with 55.4 per cent of respondents reporting the experience.

World leading educational psychologist and co-lead investigator Professor Herb Marsh, who has been at the helm of the report since 2016, said school principals were remarkably resilient, but increasing job demands and burnout are putting them at risk.

“It is deeply concerning that offensive behaviour towards school leaders and teachers persists and appears to be on the rise,” he said.

Despite the spike in violence and the toll on their mental health and wellbeing, the survey found school leaders showed surprisingly strong levels of resilience, and their work commitment remained high.

Compiled by the Australian Catholic University’s (ACU) Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (IPPE), the latest survey of 2,300 principals reveal instances of physical violence increased 76.5 per cent since 2011.

It also showed school leaders suffered higher rates of anxiety and depression than the general population, with early career school leaders most at risk.

Offensive behaviours towards principals escalated in 2023, with 48 per cent subjected to physical violence and more than half (53.9 per cent) experiencing threats of violence.

Of those reporting physical violence, a staggering 96.3 per cent was 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 2023.

Mental health of students, followed by mental health of staff and student-related issues round out the top five sources of stress.

The survey also shows more than half of school principals intend to quit or retire early. Experienced school leaders, with over 15 years behind them, are leading the charge to get out.

There is also concern about mid-career leaders turning their backs on long-term principalship, with almost 60 per cent of those with six to 10 years’ experience wanting to leave the profession.

“Assuming only half of those who agreed or strongly agreed to quit acted on this response, there would be an exodus of more than 500 school leaders – the data strongly suggests this would be experienced school leaders,” Professor Marsh said.

Professor Marsh said school principals needed credible proactive feedback about their sources of stress, resilience, and mental health – independent of state departments of education and other regulatory bodies.

ACU investigator and former principal Dr Paul Kidson called on education ministers to urgently take collective action to address the significant threats facing principals.

“We’ve had a national spotlight on teacher education and workloads, disruptions in the classroom, campaigns to boost the profession’s status, and a continued focus on students’ mental health and academic outcomes – all noble and necessary,” Dr Kidson said.

“Principals are being asked to do more with less. It’s been over a decade since the Gonski Review, and we still do not have

full funding based on student needs. It is naïve to think this does not translate into the increasing stress among school leaders today.”

IPPE co-lead investigator and leading school wellbeing expert Associate Professor Theresa Dicke said despite mounting challenges school leaders showed extraordinary dedication, commitment and commendable resilience.

“But every year we call for more to be done. There is an urgency for education ministers to prioritise responding to the data in this report,” she said.

She called for a national summit to coordinate strategies and resources to ensure issues facing principals are in focus.

“Otherwise, many of them will act on their intention to leave and it will make achieving important policy initiatives very unlikely.”

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