Leading Under Pressure: The Principal's Wellbeing Challenge

Research demonstrates that school leaders are navigating an environment of intensified demands, marked by escalating student wellbeing challenges and their own rising occupational pressures. The 2024 Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Survey, conducted by the Australian Catholic University's Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (ACU), paints a confronting picture for school leaders. Principals are facing increasing workloads, offensive and abusive behaviour, and the growing prevalence of anxiety and depression among students. While the data for this study is based on the experiences of Australian principals, it raises concerns relevant to school leaders globally, especially in light of the growing recognition of the importance of wellbeing throughout the whole school community.

A defining feature of the 2024 survey findings is that Australian school leaders are experiencing increasing levels of anxiety and depression. In many cases, this is directly related to the physical violence, threats, bullying and workload pressures experienced by principals. Rising rates of anxiety and depression are concerning. Yet the survey also shows "surprisingly high" levels of job satisfaction, with a high work commitment. The challenge lies in addressing the needs of principals to avoid losing high quality educators and leaders from the profession. More than half of the principals who participated in this survey did signal an intention to leave their role. For those experiencing low job satisfaction, this figure climbs to over 80 per cent. This is an important crossroad where school leaders' own wellbeing must be protected so they can in turn continue to support school communities to be positive spaces for staff and students.

As the ACU's survey outlines, principals are continuing to work longer hours, face more threats and violence, and encounter more emotional demands than in previous years of this survey. In fact, threats of violence are at the highest level reported since this survey was first developed in 2011, and principals are facing workplace conditions that are considered unacceptable in many other industries. Yet despite these conditions, principals remain committed and invested in their schools, with many citing themes such as making a difference to students as a significant motivator for enduring these challenges. Solutions to address this challenge must be considered in order to avoid losing not only school leaders, but also to avoid exacerbating teacher shortages in schools more generally.

One of the most concerning factors for principals is the exposure to offensive and violent behaviour. The ACU's national survey found that threats of violence are being carried out at concerning levels and can include physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, general

conflicts and arguments, gossip, slander and cyberbullying. This ongoing exposure to risk is a unique and disturbing trend in education, impacting not only the individuals involved, but the wider health of school communities. These threats of violence (including those where the threats are carried out) involve not only students themselves, but also parents and caregivers. This creates a confronting challenge for school leaders.

Another key area of stress cited by principals is the mental health of staff and students. Principals understand there are difficulties for those wishing to access specialist external support. This makes the mental health challenges faced by students increasingly difficult to manage, especially as access to specialised support services continues to remain challenging due to extensive wait times, limited funding, and lack of specialist staff. Regional, remote, and disadvantaged communities are especially hard hit by shortages of external supports, heightening inequity in access to mental health care.

Amidst these pressures, resilience is apparent, yet school leaders are critically aware that these levels of resilience among themselves and their staff are at risk due to these ongoing stressors. Key sources of support drawn upon by principals include partners/spouses, friends, colleagues, family members and professional relationships. Yet as workplace pressures increase, more is required. Principals cite their frustration that the current situation means they are facing a risk of losing quality teachers, but also facing their own struggles that are contributing to lower levels of general health and wellbeing. This reinforces the need to address these challenges with consolidated strategies to support Australia's school leadership community.

Principals are calling for reform at multiple levels. At an immediate level, the ACU survey and report recommends that governments and employers can address the quantity of work facing school leaders. This can be supported through the use of meaningful autonomy and provision of additional resources, support and open communication. The report also urges governments and employers to reduce unnecessary administrative burden and red tape. This will allow principals to focus on core educational leadership work. This can also be holistically supported through the recognition that wellbeing is equally important as academic achievement and other work outputs.

Other recommendations developed from the survey include improvements to principal preparation and induction, more visible and sustained efforts to support principal mental health, and a review of support mechanisms for addressing threats and abuse directed toward principals and other school staff. Where appropriate, schools can also consider alternate leadership models such as co-principalship.

The latest ACU survey makes clear that today's principals are under more pressure than ever before – and this pressure is coming from multiple directions including student needs, occupational risk, job intensity, and complex community expectations. Principals remain resilient and passionate, but the current trajectory is not sustainable without far greater support and systemic change. As custodians of both educational excellence and community wellbeing, school leaders need urgent, targeted action to reduce risk, restore balance, and allow them principals to lead with confidence and compassion. Investing in the health of school leadership is a matter of national educational urgency.

References

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