

PRINCIPAL WORKLOAD, PRINCIPAL WELLBEING

Primary school principals are essential to fostering quality education, community engagement, and student success. They make a difference.

THE ROLE OF PRIMARY LEADER

The primary leader plays a vital role in building community and engaging families by serving as a bridge between the school and its broader community. They are often the first engagement with families in the formal learning process, fostering a welcoming, inclusive environment that encourages and builds parental involvement.

According to John Hattie, principals are the second most important influence on student achievement within a school, after classroom teachers. While Hattie's research shows that the direct effect of principals on student learning is not as significant as that of teachers, principals play a crucial role in creating the conditions for effective teaching and learning. Hattie emphasises that principals can have a substantial indirect effect on student outcomes through their focus on instructional leadership, promoting teacher collaboration, establishing a positive school climate, setting high expectations, and ensuring a focus on evidence-based teaching practices. By fostering an environment where teachers can thrive, principals contribute significantly to student achievement, making them key figures in the overall success of a school.¹

School leaders focus on teaching and modelling excellence and equity, ensuring that all children in their care become confident, creative individuals, successful learners, and engaged, informed members of the community, as outlined in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration.

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PRINCIPAL WORKLOAD

However, increasing workloads, compliance tasks, and inadequate resources are leading to burnout, with 56% of principals considering leaving their roles, according to the 2023 Australian Principal Wellbeing Survey.² While being a principal is a profession that we believe can be the best in the world, we need to address the issues that are making it a less than desirable job. Addressing the workload and wellbeing of primary school principals is crucial to retaining effective leaders and ensuring student success.

What we want is an education system which enables the development of healthy, literate, numerate, happy children who are well connected to, and supported within their communities. When the whole system is working as it should, we have engaged, motivated staff confident to lead responsive and quality teaching and learning.

TO ADDRESS PRINCIPAL WORKLOAD AND WELLBEING

Provide business management solutions

The role of primary leaders must be manageable. They are increasingly asked to do more with less, and this risks too many leaders and emerging leaders leaving and taking up opportunities elsewhere. The increasing workload threatens to undermine their ability to lead effectively. Work volume has increased with more compliance tasks, audits and required documentation, implemented with no increase in financial or human resources. Job demands need to be matched with job resources.

The addition of compliance tasks, audits and associated required documentation have resulted in organisational management now taking too much of a leader's time, taking time away from culture and community establishment (human resource ►

management) and educational / instructional leadership. In times of teacher workforce shortage, recruiting teachers, including sourcing relief teachers, is taking more and more time and many school leaders are spending more time each day reorganising the school to ensure classes have a teacher in front of them. We need strong business management to take care of the many operational dimensions of the role. (For example, budgeting management of ancillary staff, operation of childcare centres, and integrated services.)

Ensure principal safety and support

The accountabilities in the primary principal role are many³ and the intensification of principals' work has been well documented. It will always be a demanding and busy profession, but it needs to also be one that is respected, safe and worthwhile.

To lead well, principals need to be physically, psychologically and reputationally safe. It is the responsibility of employers to provide a safe and healthy work environment and to take all reasonable steps to protect employees from harm and injury. An effective, supportive, person centred approach by systems ensures principals are safe and supported and better able to support others.

Prepare for school leaders for their role

Effective principal preparation must be tailored to the unique needs of schools and communities, with gender, culture, and context as guiding principles. School leaders, particularly those in low SES areas or facing crises, deserve regular professional supervision and coaching. We must ensure all principals have access to quality differentiated professional learning that empowers them to lead effectively. Investing in these measures is essential for creating school leadership that is truly fit for purpose.

Enact policy development that works

Currently, school leaders feel disenfranchised from the policy development process and feel there is too much input from people who have never set foot inside a classroom (other than their own student experience). We accept their intentions are good - just wrong! Schools need input into decisions that impact them. While it is recognised that government set policy agendas, those policy agendas can and should be enriched by a school perspective. Working with schools in the continuing refinement of policy propositions enhances policy outcomes and increases the likelihood of policy implementation success.

Policies need to be adaptable to local contexts. There are many decisions that should be taken at the local level where the context is known. We need to take seriously, the ability of experienced educators to make good decisions to suit their context and to move away from a bureaucratic 'one size fits' all approach which is sadly killing initiative, responsiveness, and creativity. This means devolving more resources to the school level and trusting senior educators to make good decisions in their local context. Trust your leaders!

Schools are well versed in using evidence-based research to support changing practise, but Australian educational indicators are not showing improvement. It is time we insist that evidenced-based policy settings are also adopted. Where is the evidence that policy settings such as those established in the current NSRA are effective and resulting in the agreed outcomes? Serious school reform needs to look at structuring a school / bureaucracy interface which works, by working with schools in developing workable policy positions.

SUMMARY

When we support principals with effective preparation, a safe work environment and manageable workloads, we make a positive investment in the future of our students. By ensuring that principals can perform their roles effectively, we are securing better educational outcomes for all children.

APPA calls for the BFSA to be a catalyst for real school reform, one which harnesses the energy of professionals working in the area to achieve mutually desired results. What it shouldn't be, is more of the same, more and more measuring in the hope that results come from increased micromanagement and falsely premised accountability. School based personnel feel confined by the morass of measurement which kills initiative and creativity and inhibits schools responding community by community to pressing needs. Substantive change requires a substantial change in emphasis. This emphasis must turn the bureaucracy on its head and instead see systems actively partner with those on the ground, in particular principals and teachers.

- 1 Hattie, John: **Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning (2012) and Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement (2008).**
- 2 [The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey \(squarespace.com\)](#)
- 3 APPA's 'A contemporary school leader'