

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR PRINCIPALS

The role of primary school principals in Australia today extends far beyond administrative duties. Principals are instructional leaders, strategic planners, crisis managers, community connectors, and advocates for equity and excellence. They play a critical role in shaping the quality of education, school culture, student outcomes, and staff wellbeing. Given the growing demands and complexities of the role, including rapid technological changes, increasing student diversity, multiple compliance and workload demands, heightened community expectations, and ongoing reforms, there is an urgent need to invest in sustained, targeted, and high-impact professional learning (PL) for school leaders. Despite this, access to meaningful professional learning remains inconsistent, underfunded, and often misaligned with the realities of the role. APPA firmly believes that professional learning is not a luxury. It is essential.

THE CASE FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING (PL)

Professional learning is accepted as a necessary support for teachers; however, principals also deserve access to ongoing learning activities. Professional learning equips principals with the skills and knowledge to lead effectively, better support teachers in their work, create a supportive learning environment for students and enhances their credibility with parents and the wider community.

ADDRESSES COMPLEX AND EVOLVING DEMANDS

Principals manage multifaceted responsibilities. These include leading teaching and learning, facilitating curriculum innovation and implementation, supporting student wellbeing, navigating crises, employing a range of technologies and methods to manage a school, and engaging and working with the community.

ENHANCES STUDENT OUTCOMES

Research consistently affirms that school leadership is second only to classroom instruction in its in-school impact on student learning.¹ John Hattie more specifically notes that instructional leaders and their involvement with curriculum planning, setting academic goals and support of teacher development have the greatest effect.²

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SUPPORTS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

School leaders are charged with providing instructional leadership but often school management takes precedence as increasing demands impact the leader's time, confidence, and capacity. In one study, over one-third of principals reported that they had no professional learning around instructional leadership and 45% of those who engaged in some learning, said it was 'average' to 'weak' in supporting the development of their capabilities.³

ENSURES RETENTION AND WELLBEING

Quality PL contributes to principals' resilience and efficacy, significantly reducing attrition and ensuring leadership continuity. Principals need access to professional learning at all stages in their careers and, in fact, a research report published by the NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals) in the United States noted that Principals cite a lack of professional learning opportunities as the top reason for leaving the profession.⁴

EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

What effective professional learning looks like.

Contextualised Tailoring professional learning to the stage of career is important. Many professional learning activities have been focused on the needs of aspiring or newly appointed principals leaving experienced school leaders without the support they need. Experienced principals benefit from training on instructional leadership and strategic leadership skills while less experienced principals also need training on technical issues such as financial management. The context of community, gender and culture also needs to be considered. ►

Personalised and flexible A 2017 survey by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) indicated that school leaders primarily attended specific courses delivered outside or within the workplace. A 2022 survey indicated a dramatic shift to in-house learning such as online learning. The increase in online professional learning activities which are more accessible, flexible, cost-effective, and scalable (reaching many people) than traditional courses and workshops, has allowed for more options and opportunities. School leaders reported online learning as the main type of professional learning activity followed by network conversations and general reading.⁵ While increasing accessibility, this can contribute to decreased peer connection and increased isolation in the role.

Collaborative and practice-informed The sharing of knowledge and expertise can improve the quality of professional learning, so it is important to find new ways of incorporating more collaborative practice in professional learning activities, including those conducted online. Partnering with an experienced principal can provide invaluable insights that are grounded in lived experience as well as building a leader's professional network.

Coaching for sustained leadership growth Former principal and educational leader, Dr Paul Teys, concludes that the future of professional development for school leaders lies in innovative, focused, and accessible learning activities such as virtual coaching models, access to expert mentors, artificial intelligence-driven simulations, and immersive VR experiences.⁶

KEY AREAS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Professional leadership for school leaders needs to address Instructional leadership, leading teaching and learning

- » Change and strategic leadership
- » Leading innovation, change and informed improvement
- » School management
- » Community engagement and collaboration
- » Cultural competence and inclusion
- » Wellbeing and resilience
- » System and policy knowledge
- » Digital and data literacy

SUMMARY

Valuing principals begins with investing in their professional growth and equipping them with the contemporary leadership, pedagogical, and wellbeing skills required to thrive in increasingly dynamic educational environments. **APPA calls for sustained commitment and investment from the federal government as both a professional and ethical imperative, to ensure that every primary school principal in Australia has access to high-quality professional development.** Such a commitment, particularly as advocated in recent discussions with Minister Jason Clare, is crucial and represents a strategic investment in Australia's educational future, significantly benefiting leaders, teachers, students, and communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Develop a **national framework** for professional learning for principals, ensuring consistency and relevance of PL across all educational sectors, highlighting support for rural and remote leaders.
- 2 Ensure that principals have **dedicated time and adequate resources** explicitly for PL activities, including coaching, leadership networks and peer mentoring.
- 3 **Formalise and sustain funding** for platforms such as the National Principals' Reference Group (NPRG), enabling cross-sectoral collaboration, peer learning, and policy advocacy.
- 4 **Embed professional learning** as a core element within educational policy frameworks, recognising its central role in overall school improvement.
- 5 **Prioritise wellbeing** within leadership development and establish a Principal Wellbeing and Efficacy Research Fund to underpin evidence-based practices, complementing ongoing research by ACU and Monash University
- 6 **Enable principals to lead and grow** by removing obstacles that block access to the professional development and collaboration essential for sustainable leadership.

1 'Effective leadership. *Learning Curve Issue 10*. (17 November 2015). <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/education-data-and-research/cese/publications/research-reports/effective-leadership#Related2>. Accessed 23 June 2025.

2 Hattie, J (2015). 'High-impact leadership.' *Educational Leadership*, vol. 72, no. 5, pp. 36-40. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/high-impact-leadership>. Accessed 24 June 2025.

3 Elliott, K., & Hollingsworth, H. (2020). 'A case for reimagining school leadership development to enhance collective efficacy'. *Camberwell, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research*. https://research.acer.edu.au/educational_leadership/5. Accessed 11 June 2025.

4 Levin, S. & Bradley, K. 'Understanding and addressing Principal turnover'. *NASSP Learning Policy Institute*. March 19, 2019. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/hassp-understanding-addressing-principal-turnover-review-research-report>. Accessed 11 June 2025

5 'Spotlight: High-Quality Professional Learning for Australian school teachers and school leaders' (June 2023). *Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited*. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/high-quality-professional-learning-for-australian-teachers-and-school-leaders> Accessed 12 June 2025

6 Henebery. 'Australia's school leadership.