

RAISING THE PROFILE OF PRIMARY LEADERS IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) maintains that the contemporary role of the primary school principal is neither well understood or sufficiently valued by the broader community. Yet it is through their leadership that Australia's values of fairness, aspiration, and opportunity for all are brought to life, transforming national ideals into meaningful, everyday experiences for every child.

Today's primary school leaders are the cornerstone of a successful education system. Their role is far more expansive than traditional perceptions might suggest. They are not only leaders of teaching and learning but also visionary community connectors, mentors, counsellors, project managers, data analysts, and advocates. They operate with an unwavering commitment to every child's success, not just academically, but socially, emotionally, physically and creatively and as citizens of their communities.

THE ROLE OF PRINCIPALS

Principals are educational managers

Principals are the face of their schools. They communicate and build trust with families, lead school improvement, and foster deep, lasting partnerships with local councils, service organisations, and support networks, all in service of student wellbeing and achievement. They are highly skilled professionals who manage complex systems with fiscal responsibility, interpersonal acumen and strategic oversight.

In many ways, they are CEOs of their schools, ensuring that every moving part contributes to the shared goal of student success. According to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, Principals 'align management procedures and processes to the educational goals and the vision and values of the school...ensuring that management procedures are fully understood by staff who take collective responsibility for the smooth and efficient running of the school.'¹

Principals engage with communities and lead societal change

Their responsibilities extend beyond the school gates. Elliott and Hollingsworth note that principals are often regarded as leaders within the local community.² In many communities, principals serve on local fire brigades, coach sporting teams and, in country communities, negotiate housing and support for incoming teachers, demonstrating their integral role in sustaining vibrant communities. In every context, they are responsible for supporting student mental health, ensuring the safe administration of student medications, and advocating for families in crisis.

They also play a central role in shaping societal values and awareness among young learners. Whether promoting environmental responsibility, embracing multiculturalism, addressing bullying, or ensuring safety on roads and in water, principals are pivotal in guiding students to become informed, empathetic citizens. ▶

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Principals are agents of change and improvement

Critically, primary principals are leaders of change and professional growth. They develop staff, lead curriculum implementation, and analyse performance data to ensure pedagogical practices are impactful and both evidence and practice informed. Their leadership is committed to growing the teaching profession, ensuring that teachers are confident, capable, and empowered to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving education landscape. According to Elliott, effective school leaders create opportunities for rigorous professional learning and collaboration that promotes a culture conducive to learning and development.³

Principals are moral leaders

More than operational leaders, primary principals are moral leaders. They champion the under-served, promote inclusion, cultivate creativity, and uphold the dignity and potential of every learner. They shape school cultures where young people are known, valued, and inspired to thrive. A 2023 paper drawing upon findings from Tasmanian, Victorian, and Northern Territory multiple-perspective case studies of successful primary, secondary, and special school principals found that the principals had strong values and beliefs, which were also reflected in the values, beliefs, and orientations of the schools.⁴

Since 2011, *The Conversation* has been surveying Australian school leaders about what is happening in their jobs, now the longest running survey of its type in the world. The 2023 survey found that the work levels, stress, and abuse continue but, on top of this, school leaders are experiencing significant levels of mental illness and more than half agreed or strongly agreed, 'I often seriously consider leaving my current job.'⁵

Imagine an education system without these leaders, without their commitment, their strategic insight, or their deep sense of moral purpose. The truth is, without effective primary leadership, the foundations of our education system would falter. It is through their stewardship that Australia can deliver a global standard education, one that recognises, nurtures, and celebrates the strengths of every child.

SECURING THE FUTURE

APPA calls for a national commitment to restoring respect, trust, and support for primary principals.

To secure the future of Australian education, we must **value and invest in** the people who hold its foundation steady, **our primary principals**. Esteeming their leadership begins with systems and governments publicly recognising the complexity and impact of their role, embedding their voice in decision-making, and ensuring their workload is sustainable.

This means:

- » **designing policies** with principals, not for them,
- » providing timely access to **professional learning** and coaching,
- » **resourcing schools** to match the scope of leadership responsibilities,
- » embedding system-wide structures that **prioritise principal wellbeing** and professional agency,
- » **establishing systems that declutter their role**, allowing them to focus on their core business; creating the conditions for every child to thrive; academically, socially, and emotionally,
- » **elevating their public profile** so that communities truly understand the depth of their contribution, not only to education, but to society.

When we lift our leaders, we lift our schools. When we lift our schools, we lift our nation. Because strong leadership in the primary years shapes not just classrooms; it shapes futures.

- 1 'Interactive leadership profiles'. *Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership*. https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/teach-documents/leading-the-management-of-the-school.pdf?sfvrsn=ef1aa43c_2. Accessed 29 June 2025.
- 2 Elliott, K., & Hollingsworth, H. (2020). 'A case for reimagining school leadership development to enhance collective efficacy.' *Australian Council for Educational Research*. https://research.acer.edu.au/educational_leadership/5/. Accessed 29 June 2025.
- 3 Elliott, K. L. (2019). 'Teachers' perceptions and experiences of a performance and development process as a mechanism to support teacher development.' *The University of Melbourne, Faculty of Education – Theses*. <https://hdl.handle.net/11343/228901>. Accessed 29 June 2025.
- 4 Goode, H., Drysdale, L. & Gurr, D. (2023). 'What We Know about Successful School Leadership from Australian Cases and an Open Systems Model of School Leadership.' *Education Sciences*, vol. 13, issue 11. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13111142>. Accessed 29 June 2025.
- 5 'School principals are reaching crisis point, pushed to the edge by mounting workloads, teacher shortages and abuse.' *The Conversation* (20 March 2023). <https://theconversation.com/school-principals-are-reaching-crisis-point-pushed-to-the-edge-by-mounting-workloads-teacher-shortages-and-abuse-201777>. Accessed 29 June 2025.

REDUCING RED TAPE IN AUSTRALIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A SHIFT TOWARD EFFICIENCY AND TRUST

INTRODUCTION

The administrative burden on Australian primary school teachers and leaders has escalated, diverting valuable time and resources away from teaching and learning. Reports from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2020)¹ and the Queensland Department of Education (2025)² and input from educational experts at the recent APPA Educational Summit, highlight the urgent need to streamline compliance and administrative processes. This position paper argues for a paradigm shift, moving from a compliance-driven system to a trust-based framework, supported by strategic guardrails to ensure accountability and equity. In reducing red tape, Australian schools can refocus on what matters most: improving student outcomes through high-impact teaching and learning.

THE BURDEN OF COMPLIANCE

AITSL's *Shifting the Balance* report (2020) identifies excessive administrative tasks as a key barrier to effective teaching. Educators are increasingly burdened by repetitive data entry, rigid templates, and complex documentation requirements, often without a clear link to student outcomes.

A recent APPA survey (2024) found that most primary principals spend between 61% and 80% of their work week on administration and compliance. This cumulative load is significantly reducing time for instructional leadership and student support.

Key pressure points identified by school leaders include:

- » Extensive documentation for student wellbeing and behaviour management
- » Procedural requirements for excursions and camps, often governed by duplicative and inflexible processes

While risk and compliance are essential, their current implementation is inefficient and contributes to staff burnout.

KEY CHALLENGES

- 1 Duplication of Reporting**
Schools are frequently required to submit the same or similar data to multiple agencies. This redundancy creates additional work without adding value or improving educational outcomes.
- 2 Rigid Bureaucratic Processes**
Many compliance systems apply uniform rules to all schools, regardless of context. State and Federal rulings vary and often contradict or duplicate. This limits responsiveness and creates inefficiencies in schools with different needs and capacities.
- 3 Limited Local Autonomy**
School leaders often report being unable to adapt procedures to suit their local communities due to overly prescriptive mandates, undermining professional judgment.

These challenges are symptoms of a broader systemic issue: a culture of distrust that prioritises evidencing compliance over enabling effective teaching.

A PARADIGM SHIFT: TRUST OVER COMPLIANCE

To meaningfully reduce red tape, the education system must transition from rigid proceduralism to a model that empowers educators and respects their expertise. This requires structural and cultural change: simplifying systems, decentralising authority, and using technology as a tool for efficiency rather than surveillance. ►

PRINCIPLES OF A TRUST-BASED FRAMEWORK

- » **Decentralised Decision-Making**
Schools should be granted greater autonomy to interpret and implement compliance measures. Clear guidelines can replace detailed prescriptions, allowing leaders to tailor their practices to local needs.
- » **Risk-Based Regulation**
Oversight should be proportional. High-risk areas may warrant closer scrutiny, while low-risk areas can be managed with simplified processes.
- » **Technology-Driven Solutions**
Integrated digital systems can eliminate duplication, automate low-risk reporting, and reduce reliance on manual data entry.
- » **Recognition of Professional Expertise**
Educators must be trusted as professionals capable of self-regulation within clear ethical and operational standards. This is aligned with AITSL's (2020) call for greater emphasis on evidence-informed professional judgment.

GUARDRAILS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Shifting toward trust does not mean eliminating oversight. Accountability mechanisms must remain, but should support, not hinder, professional practice.

- » **Targeted, Periodic Audits:** Audits should focus on key indicators and be conducted periodically rather than continuously. This approach balances transparency with practicality.
- » **Consolidated Reporting Platforms:** A single portal for data submission would streamline reporting, reduce duplication, and enable greater consistency across jurisdictions.
- » **Collaborative Policy Design:** Compliance frameworks should be co-designed with educators, school leaders, and policy-makers to ensure relevance, feasibility, and shared ownership.

These measures reinforce trust by ensuring consistency and fairness, without unnecessary micromanagement.

EMPOWERING SCHOOL LEADERS

Reducing red tape requires a reimagining of leadership roles. Principals must be supported and trusted to lead instructional improvement rather than to administer compliance. APPA encourages this shift, suggesting that school leaders be equipped with the flexibility and authority to manage school operations in ways that prioritise learning outcomes.

Key reforms include:

- » Allowing leaders to adapt or temporarily suspend administrative processes during peak periods (e.g., reporting cycles)
- » Providing targeted professional learning to help leaders navigate complexity with clarity and confidence
- » Recognising and rewarding schools that innovate in reducing administrative burden without compromising quality

In addition, the growing compliance burden in primary schools over the past decade has not been matched by an increase in staffing. If red tape is deemed essential, it must be accompanied by the human resources required to manage it. Only then will school leaders see a genuine commitment to reducing workload and improving job satisfaction, both critical to sustaining a strong and stable workforce.

CONCLUSION

Reducing red tape in Australian primary schools is not merely a question of cutting paperwork; it is about restoring trust in the professional expertise of leaders and educators. Through decentralised decision-making, risk-based regulation, digital integration, and collaborative accountability, the education system can shift from a culture of compliance to one of trust, underpinned by appropriate guardrails. The AITSL (2020) and Queensland Department of Education (2025) reports provide a clear mandate for this transformation. Implemented systemically, these reforms will allow educators to focus on their core mission: teaching, leading, and helping every student thrive.

1. 'Shifting the balance: Increasing the focus on teaching and learning by reducing the burden of compliance and administration', *Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership* (AITSL) 2020 <https://pages.aitsl.edu.au/red-tape/review-to-reduce-red-tape-for-teachers-and-school-leaders>
2. 'Red Tape Reduction for Queensland Teachers', *Department of Education* 2025 <https://education.qld.gov.au/initiativesstrategies/Documents/red-tape-reduction-consultation-report.pdf>

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

“There is an urgent need to invest in sustained, targeted, and high-impact professional learning for school leaders.”

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.

FULL AND FAIR FUNDING

The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (January 2025) ties the additional 25% Commonwealth funding to reforms that will help students catch up, keep up and finish school. But what do these reforms look like in practical terms and how can they be achieved? As the national voice for primary school leaders across Australia's 7,600 primary schools, the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) is uniquely positioned to provide evidence and practice-informed recommendations that reflect the diverse needs of our communities.

PRIORITIES

To maximise government investment and improve student outcomes, funding should be distributed to primary schools based on the following priorities. They include enhanced support for students with additional needs, strengthened teacher capacity, reduced administrative burden on school leaders, and expanded access to early intervention and wellbeing services.

- 1 **Needs-based allocation** Direct funding to schools based on student disadvantage, including socio-economic status, Indigeneity, English as an additional language, and regional or remote locations. Targeted, needs-based funding, delivered directly to schools, empowers school leaders to make evidence-informed and practice-informed decisions that maximise learning opportunities and outcomes for every student, regardless of their geographic location or background.
- 2 **Early intervention and wellbeing** Invest in early childhood supports and school-based wellbeing programs to address barriers to learning from the outset.
- 3 **Workforce capability** Fund targeted professional learning, mentoring, and induction programs to attract, retain, and upskill teachers and school leaders.
- 4 **Digital equity** Support quality learning by ensuring that students and staff in all primary schools have access to reliable digital tools and the professional learning and support needed to be confident, capable and innovative users of technology.
- 5 **Support staffing** Resource schools to employ additional support staff to better meet diverse learning needs and student complexity.
- 6 **Disabilities resourcing** Provide resources to students who have undiagnosed disabilities and/or learning disorders that are not funded through other means, to ensure every child has equitable access to education, support, and the opportunity to thrive.

REVIEW THE SCHOOLING RESOURCE STANDARD (SRS)

An urgent review of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) is also needed, to address the significant and widening per-student funding gap between primary and secondary schools in Australia. High-performing education systems such as Estonia, which was the top performer in the world in Science, Reading and Mathematics in the PISA (Programme for International Students Assessment) in 2018¹, demonstrate that maintaining a minimal funding differential across school levels can lead to stronger and more equitable student outcomes.² Estonia invests strategically in early and primary education, recognising that strong foundations are critical for long-term success both for learners and the nation.

Australia's future prosperity depends on ensuring that every child, regardless of age or stage, is equally supported to achieve their full potential through fair and needs-based funding. At the 2025 APPA Primary Summit (May 26) Professor Frank Oberklaid shared data showing that Australia spends less than 0.6% of its GDP on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which is lower than the OECD average of 0.8%. Countries performing higher on PISA spend more of the GDP on ECEC: Iceland 1.8%, Sweden 1.7%, Norway 1.6% and France 1.3%. ►

KEY ACTIVITIES

Here are 12 high impact strategies that full and fair funding would allow schools to more fully implement, to ensure best outcomes for all students

- 1 Implement **targeted literacy and numeracy programs** for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, regularly tracking and adjusting progress.
- 2 Engage **cultural liaison officers and community elders** to support Indigenous students and embed culturally responsive teaching practices.
- 3 Support **early intervention** for students with developmental needs.
- 4 Deliver **structured wellbeing programs** such as social-emotional learning, trauma-informed practices, and mental health support.
- 5 Provide **mentoring and induction programs** for teachers and school leaders to build capacity and reduce attrition.
- 6 Facilitate **ongoing, high-impact professional learning** aligned to student needs and evidence-informed pedagogy.
- 7 Employ **additional learning support staff and teacher aides** and build their capacity to work to support teachers in schools.
- 8 Create **flexible groupings and timetables** to enable smaller, needs-based instructional groups and help cater for students who are school refusers.
- 9 Support **strong digital environments** to ensure digital infrastructure, devices and pedagogy are elevated and maintained.
- 10 Enhance **learning environments** through upgraded facilities that support inclusive, collaborative, and future-focused education.
- 11 Strengthen **instructional leadership** by providing primary schools with additional middle leaders to respond to the intensity of the work, strengthen curriculum development, enhance pedagogy, and reduce teacher workload for improved student outcomes.
- 12 **Collaboration time** for primary school teachers is essential to enhance planning, share expertise, and tailor teaching strategies to better meet the diverse needs of students.

SUMMARY

Primary schools form the bedrock of Australia's education system, and strategic investment at this foundational level delivers the greatest long-term benefit to student achievement and national equity. Funding from the Better and Fairer Schools Agreements must be delivered directly to schools, as research clearly shows that money flowing through the school gate, positively impacts student learning outcomes.³ Schools must have the autonomy to use this funding to meet the unique needs of their students and communities.

APPA calls for funding mechanisms that recognise and leverage the professional judgement and contextual wisdom of school leaders, ensuring that resources are directed where they are needed most. By empowering local leadership and targeting investment, we can ensure every child, regardless of their postcode or background, receives the high-quality education they deserve.

1 'Brief on high-performing systems: Estonia'. *NCEE Legislative International Education Study Group* (2020-2021). <https://documents.ncsl.org/wwwncsl/Education/Study-Group/1.EstoniaProfileNCEE.pdf>. Accessed 18 June 2025.

2 'ESTONIA: Overview of the education system (EAG 2024). *OECD: Education GPS*. <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=EST&threshold=10&topic=EO>. Accessed 19 June 2025.

3 Sohn, H., Park, H. & Jung, H. 'The Effect of Extra School Funding on Students' Academic Achievements under a Centralized School Financing System'. *Education Finance & Policy* [January 01 2023]. <https://direct.mit.edu/edfp/article/18/1/1/109966/The-Effect-of-Extra-School-Funding-on-Students>. Accessed 19 June 2025.

PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) advocates for the implementation of professional supervision and support systems for school leaders. This approach addresses the growing challenges facing principals, including high stress levels, exposure to traumatic events, and the increasing complexity of their roles. Supporting school leaders' mental health and wellbeing is not just a matter of care but a strategic imperative that directly impacts staff wellbeing and, consequently, student outcomes.

Evidence demonstrates that proactive, preventative, and responsive programs tailored to the unique needs of school leaders can significantly improve their effectiveness, resilience, and overall job satisfaction. APPA calls for systemic investment in professional supervision frameworks, integrated support teams, and tailored initiatives for high-risk cohorts to ensure principals are well-equipped to lead thriving school communities.

“The principal role is marked by high exposure to challenging interactions, including conflicts, critical incidents, and community crises. Despite these challenges, principals currently lack access to professional supervision—a widely adopted framework in allied health professions.”

THE CASE FOR ACTION

Mental Health and Wellbeing of School Leaders

Research consistently indicates a significant relationship between school staff well-being and student outcomes. To ensure principals lead effectively, their mental health must be prioritised through preventative, early intervention, and responsive programs. A strong narrative from the top, emphasising care and mental health, underscores the importance of accessible and quality-assured support services that deliver measurable outcomes.

Unique Challenges of the Principal Role

The principal role is marked by high exposure to challenging interactions, including conflicts, critical incidents, and community crises. Despite these challenges, principals currently lack access to professional supervision—a widely adopted framework in allied health professions. Reflective supervision, coaching, and integrated support systems are necessary to maintain their health and wellbeing while enabling them to navigate the complexities of their roles effectively.

PROPOSED INITIATIVES

Integrated Team Around the Principal

- » Streamlined Access to Support: Reduce the number of steps required to access help, ensuring prompt and efficient resolution of issues.
- » Trauma-Informed Responses: Embed trauma-informed practices into principal support systems to address the impact of critical incidents.
- » Professional and Executive Coaching: Allocate \$2,200 per school leader annually (CPI adjusted) for professional coaching, supported by high-level system endorsement. Provide this to schools directly and in addition to a leader's professional learning budget. ▶

Reflective Supervision Framework

Reflective supervision for school leaders is akin to clinical supervision for psychologists. In both contexts, the focus is on providing a structured, supportive environment for reflective practice, emotional resilience, and professional growth. For principals, this involves:

- » **Dedicated Time for Reflection:** Just as clinical supervision allows psychologists to debrief and reflect on complex cases, principal supervision provides school leaders with opportunities to process challenging interactions and decisions.
- » **Expert Guidance:** Supervision is led by trained professionals who understand the unique demands of school leadership, such as navigating trauma, resolving conflicts, and maintaining community relationships.
- » **Proactive and Restorative Support:** Like clinical supervision, principal supervision helps to prevent burnout, foster resilience, and promote effective leadership practices.

THIS FRAMEWORK IS PARTICULARLY VITAL IN HIGH-RISK COHORTS:

- » **Low SES Communities:** Address the compounded challenges of socio-economic disadvantage.
- » **Rural and Remote Schools:** Provide targeted support for isolated or single leadership roles.
- » **Crisis-Affected Communities:** Offer additional resources for schools recovering from events such as deaths, natural disasters, or significant disruptions.
- » **Data-Driven Targeting:** Use evidence, such as community risk profiles, to prioritise supervision support.

CONCLUSION

Investing in the mental health and wellbeing of school leaders is a critical step toward building resilient, high-performing educational communities.

APPA calls for professional supervision, integrated support systems, and targeted programs that can transform the way school leaders navigate their roles and maintain their wellbeing, ensuring they are equipped to lead with confidence and care.

APPA stands ready to advocate for and support these initiatives, ensuring the sustainability and success of Australian primary school leadership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

APPA advocates for the following.

- » **Systemic investment in professional supervision**
Allocate resources for reflective supervision programs tailored to the unique challenges of school leadership.
- » **Integrated support teams**
Establish multidisciplinary teams around principals to provide seamless and efficient access to support and reduce administrative burdens.
- » **A national strategy for leadership preparation**
Develop a unified approach to mental health prevention and support for school leaders, including strategies for personal agency and resilience.
- » **Expanded research and data utilisation**
Continue to invest in research that informs the development of effective support frameworks, ensuring initiatives are evidence-based and impactful.
- » **Adoption of best practices**
Learn from successful models in other states and countries to create a robust support system for Australian principals.

Research and Evidence

- » **APPA/ACU Research:** Ongoing research on how offensive behaviours impact school leaders' productivity will provide valuable insights and inform further initiatives.¹
- » **Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Data:** Leveraging EAP usage data to identify trends, themes, and cohort-specific needs will enhance the design of support programs.²

1 'Violence escalates and mental health suffers but principals remain resilient.' ACU News. <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/news/2024/march/violence-escalates-and-mental-health-suffers-but-principals-remain-resilient>

2 'Understanding average EAP utilisation rates: traditional vs. alternative Employee Assistance Programs.' Sonder. <https://sonder.io/eap-hub/average-eap-utilisation-rates/>