

The Drivers of APPA's Work

APPA National Conference, Brisbane, Friday 29 August 2025

Colleagues, friends, leaders,

For 51 years, APPA has been built on collaboration, leaders coming together, sharing, listening, and acting for the good of our profession. This is unique in the world, and it rests on the wisdom of those who came before us.

I often wonder, what if our politicians or world leaders demonstrated the same courage? The courage to put aside ego and competition and instead work together for the benefit of citizens. Trust is central to this. As Kirsten Ferguson said, trust is believing the other person will act in your interests. APPA has proved to be trustworthy. We show our communities that adults can work together, with respect, with kindness, and we do it for one reason: the children and young people we serve.

Coming together at this conference is powerful. When we gather through APPA, we bring not just our own schools and communities, but the collective voice of thousands of children, teachers, and families across the nation, and indeed, across the world. A special thank you to our New Zealand colleagues who have joined with enthusiasm, connection, and the friendly competitiveness we all enjoy.

We are here in Brisbane because primary education matters. Because leadership matters. And because the work of principals, your work, is complex, demanding, and profoundly important. Often invisible to the public eye, its impact is everywhere. We are the calm in the storm, the first call for families in crisis, the leaders of teaching and learning, and the steady hands shaping the culture of our schools.

In this context, APPA has a plan designed to achieve our vision: primary leaders who are esteemed, confident, and thriving in leading globally standard education in very Australian primary schools. Our plan has four key drivers that guide our advocacy, commitment, and action, ensuring we influence for good and make things better together.

Driver One: Advocacy for the Profession

At its heart, advocacy means ensuring the role of the principal is understood, valued, and respected. Too often, principals' work is consumed by administration, audits, compliance demands, and building management. But when principals lead learning, amplify strengths, grow people, and build community, children benefit. Principals are the glue that holds public trust in education together, and APPA advocates for this transformative work to be the focus of attention.

We advocate by shining a light on the truth. We meet with Ministers, Departments, unions, parent groups, and media outlets to tell the real story of primary leadership. We advocate for safer workplaces, reduced administrative overload, and conditions that allow principals to focus on what matters most: teaching, learning, and wellbeing.

Advocacy is more than words. We gather data, provide evidence, and share stories so decision-makers understand the realities of school leadership. While many debate the way forward, school leaders are making it happen.

Through this advocacy, we elevate the profession. Principalship is a profession of skill, courage, and vision, deserving of respect, investment, and support.

What does this look like in action? Media engagement: sharing good news and responding to stories that misrepresent schools and our work and producing media releases for Primary Principal Day and following the Primary Summit. We shape informed positions on assessment metrics, and work with families to enable connection and belonging. We meet regularly with ACARA, AITSL, AERO, and ESA, and develop submissions to inform work on Anti-Bullying and inclusion strategies.

In 2026, APPA will launch *Start Well, Learn Well: Why Primary Matters*: a national campaign to reframe primary education as one of Australia's most strategic investments. Through compelling media, digital storytelling, including *A Year in the Life of a Principal* on Instagram, and practical tools for local advocacy, we will amplify the voice of school leaders and secure greater commitment to early and sustained investment in primary education.

This is more than a campaign. It is a movement to tell the story of primary education loudly, proudly, and with lasting impact. In the lead-up to **Australian Primary Principals Day** (3-7 August 2026), we hope to see schools opening their doors to the wider community, including politicians, to showcase the impressive achievements of our learners under responsive, innovative leadership.

Driver Two: Grow and Develop the Profession

Recognition alone is not enough; we must strengthen ourselves. Leadership is demanding, it stretches, tests, and can consume us. We must build capacity, resilience, and renewal.

We grow by sharing research, showcasing innovation, and learning from each other's triumphs and mistakes. APPA, in partnership with ACU, is leading world-first research into offensive behaviours in schools and their impact on principals' wellbeing, productivity, and student outcomes. With over six hundred principals participating, this study is already providing rich insights to inform future policy, reduce stress for leaders, and strengthen positive learning environments.

Development also means wellbeing. Principals are people first. The sustainability of our profession depends on leaders being healthy, balanced, and supported.

And it means succession. Who will step into leadership tomorrow? Without a pipeline of future leaders, our system cannot stand. APPA ensures the next generation is ready and willing.

We also grow through professional perspectives on topical issues such as curriculum, assessment, and professional learning; these are available on our website. These resources influence media, community groups, and advocacy, amplifying our voice.

APPA explainers communicate why we do what we do, from responding to racism to elevating joy and fun in learning as a strategy for psychological safety. We also share practical leader 'hacks' for common issues and



hold events such as our Women in Leadership series to understand barriers and enablers for women stepping into leadership roles.

Finally, growth happens through conferences like this one, past and future. APPA's 51-year commitment ensures leaders have time and space to connect, learn, and grow—building leadership that is strong today and stronger tomorrow.

Driver Three: Influence Primary Education

This driver is about more than leadership, it is about education itself. Too often, primary years are overshadowed by secondary debates on exams and ATARs. But the primary years shape the future; literacy, numeracy, confidence, curiosity, and character take root here.

APPA seeks to influence every space where primary education is decided: curriculum reform, assessment design, funding distribution, equity policy. We ensure policy reflects classroom realities, resources reach the schools who need them most, and innovation is celebrated and scaled.

Our advocacy contributed to the Better Fairer Schools Agreement and ongoing workforce action planning, using real case studies to show the true impact of shortages, beyond abstract numbers. Influencing primary education is about changing the narrative: strong primary schools build strong secondary schools, tertiary pathways, and communities.

In May, we held a summit at Parliament House on the economic and moral imperative of investing in primary and early education. We argued, alongside experts, that early investment is not only the right thing to do, it is one of the smartest economic decisions Australia can make. The Summit agreed on priorities including equity for First Nations students, wellbeing measures, and embedding support services in schools.

APPA champions early years because the evidence is clear: developmental vulnerability affects learning, wellbeing, and long-term outcomes. Our *Thrive with Five* campaign promotes five foundations: play, talk, read, eat well, sleep well, as low-cost, high-impact strategies for families and schools. Resources, including newsletter articles and *Make Wait Time Great Time* posters, are available on the APPA website.

However, the goodwill that supports this work is finite. Rising workloads, complex student needs, and unrealistic parental demands threaten leadership and learning. APPA continues to advocate for sustainable systems so principals can focus on teaching and learning, not being overwhelmed by administrative tasks.

AI brings both opportunity and caution, but recent research shows that roles requiring communication, collaboration, creativity, management, and care, like ours, are unlikely to be automated.

Driver Four: Effective Governance and Management

This driver is about APPA itself. To lead well, we must be well-led. Strong governance ensures APPA is accountable, transparent, and sustainable. It ensures our decisions reflect the collective voice of principals and that our resources are managed wisely.

Effective management keeps us focused, strategic, and impactful. Together, governance and management ensure APPA is the enduring voice of principals, not just today, but for decades to come.



When APPA is strong, the profession is strong. And when the profession is strong, children thrive.

Guiding Principles for Change

These drivers are our compass, but alone they do not bring change. If we cling to outdated practices, compliance culture, or risk aversion, we remain stuck. We must direct our wisdom and leadership toward the possible and transformational.

This means embracing the *sciences* of learning, from psychology, neuroscience, and education, while also **valuing practice-based evidence**. It means **measuring what truly matters**: wellbeing, engagement, connection, and the real impact of teaching and learning. It means leading with communities, and embedding **culturally safe practices**, particularly for First Nations children.

We heed the consensus from our recent APPA Summit: **investing in primary and early education** is not only moral, but also economically smart. Success requires **cross-sector collaboration, early investment, and elevating teacher voice and student agency**.

The *Mparntwe Declaration* calls for excellence and equity so every child can become a confident, creative individual, a lifelong learner, and an active citizen. APPA fights to make these aspirations real.

This is not work for APPA alone, it is work for the nation. Collaboration, not competition, must be our ethic. **Fairness sometimes means stepping back so others can step forward.**

I have hope. Every day I see extraordinary colleagues who model ethical leadership, act for all children, and navigate complex systems with innovation, creativity, and pragmatism.

Two quotes guide me:

- Sr Judith Redden on Catherine McAuley: “The judicious use of subversion in the achievement of her vision.”
- James Maxton, Scottish politician: “If you can’t ride two horses at once, you shouldn’t be in this bloody circus.”

With subversion, balance, and APPA’s plan guiding us, we will continue to advocate and agitate for better conditions and stronger leadership.

Thank you - for being here, for building and growing the profession, and for valuing, celebrating, and shaping the lives of children and the unique potential each of them holds.

Safe travels home, and I look forward to seeing you at the 2026 APPA National Conference to be held in Canberra from 30 August - 3 September 2026.

Angela Falkenberg
APPA President, 29 August 2025

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