

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.

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