

REBALANCING ACCOUNTABILITY AND AUTHORITY: WHY PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY MATTERS FOR THRIVING PRIMARY SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

Primary principals lead some of the most complex organisational environments in Australia, balancing the educational, relational and operational demands of their school communities. They hold responsibility for the learning, safety and wellbeing of children; the professional growth and performance of staff; the stewardship of community trust; and the strategic direction of their schools. Yet the conditions in which they lead have shifted markedly. Increasing social complexity, intensifying compliance requirements and heightened expectations for schools to address a broad range of social, emotional and behavioural needs have steadily constrained the autonomy and authority of school leaders.

The APPA National Advisory Council focus group of primary principals described autonomy as *“decision making based on local needs by the principal”* and *“the freedom to make decisions about how resources are allocated – human, financial and physical”*. Autonomy is therefore not abstract — it is the practical capacity to lead responsibly within established policy frameworks.

Restoring autonomy is not about shielding principals from accountability. It is about ensuring accountability does not come at the cost of leadership. Principals accept responsibility for exercising autonomy ethically and in alignment with system guidelines, creating the conditions in which they apply professional judgement, uphold safe and respectful workplaces and lead with clarity, confidence and purpose. A society and system that expects excellence from its school leaders must also empower them to lead.

“Restoring autonomy is about ensuring accountability does not come at the cost of leadership.”

1. The Case for Principal Autonomy

1.1 *Autonomy as a Foundation for Effective Leadership*

Alby Jones (1978) argued that principals require two interdependent conditions to lead effectively: the freedom to make contextually informed decisions close to the point of action, and the authority to have those decisions accepted as legitimate and final. These are structural necessities, not privileges. Focus group participants echoed this, emphasising the need for “trust in principal’s professional judgement” and alignment between policy, school-level decision making and quality assurance. When this alignment breaks down, principals experience uncertainty, second-guessing and diminished authority.

Research consistently reinforces the importance of autonomy. School leadership is the second-most influential in-school factor affecting student outcomes after classroom teaching (Leithwood et al., 2020). Autonomy enables principals to enact leadership practices by setting direction, developing people and redesigning the organisation, so that they have demonstrable effects on student learning (Leithwood & Sun, 2018). The AITSL Leadership Framework similarly highlights the need for professional discretion and contextual decision making (AITSL, 2020).

1.2 *The Changing Context of School Leadership*

The contemporary leadership environment is marked by heightened expectations, rapid technological change, increased online communication and growing community scrutiny. Focus-group principals identified clear patterns in where autonomy is most constrained, including *“staffing, complaints handling, curriculum development and delivery, WHS and OHS, wellbeing, facilities, budgets, policy and compliance management, and enrolment boundaries”*. ▶

These constraints sit at the heart of school functioning. Leaders often navigate friction between systemic mandates and local community expectations, a tension that constrains principals' capacity to authentically shape and co-construct their school's strategic direction.

OECD TALIS data shows that Australian principals spend significantly more time on administrative and compliance tasks than the OECD average, reducing time available for instructional leadership (OECD, 2019; 2024). When autonomy is constrained, principals' sense of professional efficacy declines and organisational trust weakens (Heffernan et al., 2019; Billett et al., 2019).

2. Why Autonomy Matters for System Performance

2.1 Autonomy Enables Safe and Respectful Workplaces

Principals are legally and ethically responsible for ensuring safe workplaces. Autonomy allows them to set clear expectations, implement context-specific wellbeing strategies and respond decisively to emerging risks. When autonomy is constrained, principals reported, *"becoming more risk averse"* and experiencing *"system-imposed solutions, without regard for local context"*. This undermines the principal's capacity to uphold safe and orderly environments.

2.2 Autonomy Supports Staff Wellbeing and Retention

Teacher wellbeing and retention are closely linked to the quality of school leadership (Riley, 2020). Autonomy enables principals to tailor support, build positive professional cultures and respond flexibly to local challenges.

Principals described the consequences of diminished autonomy as *"loss of job satisfaction, lack of identity, and reduced ability to attract and retain leaders"*. These are system-level risks, not individual frustrations.

2.3 Autonomy Protects Time for Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is the most powerful lever for improving student outcomes. Yet Australian principals report spending only a small proportion of their time on teaching and learning due to administrative intensification (Riley, 2019). Principals expressed a desire to *"increase focus on what my leadership can impact most in teaching and learning"* and noted that autonomy would allow them to prioritise high-impact work rather than *"low hanging fruit."*

2.4 Autonomy Strengthens Community Confidence

Communities thrive when leadership is clear, consistent and trusted. Autonomy enables principals to make timely, locally relevant decisions, communicate with clarity and uphold consistent expectations. Principals highlighted that loss of autonomy leads to *"lack of community connection and engagement and weakened organisational trust"*. When principals cannot act decisively, community confidence suffers.

3. Professional Supervision and Executive Coaching as Enablers of Autonomy

A critical but often overlooked dimension of autonomy is the capacity for principals to access professional supervision through qualified executive coaching. Coaching provides a confidential, structured space for principals to reflect on complex decisions, strengthening professional judgement and supporting psychological wellbeing.

A systematic review by Gavin and McLean (2020) found that coaching improves decision-making confidence, enhances relational leadership capabilities, reduces stress and strengthens leaders' capacity to navigate complex organisational environments. Focus-group principals linked autonomy with *"confidence to problem solve"* and *"increased feelings of trust being given"*. Access to self-identified, qualified supervision is therefore essential to sustaining autonomous leadership.

4. System-Level Opportunities to Strengthen Principal Autonomy

Drawing on AITSL's National Strategy, OECD evidence, Australian leadership research and focus-group insights, several reforms would restore the balance of freedom and authority required for effective leadership.

4.1 Streamline Compliance and Administrative Burden

Participants described compliance as a major constraint, noting *"policy and compliance management"* along with budget directives that limit strategic planning. Streamlining reporting requirements would restore time for instructional leadership. ►

“When autonomy is constrained, principals' sense of professional efficacy declines and organisational trust weakens.”

4.2 Reinforce Decision-Making Authority at the School Level

Participants were clear about where autonomy matters most: “wellbeing, teaching and learning, staffing, and resource allocation”. Policies should reinforce principal authority in these domains.

4.3 Invest in Administrative and Professional Support

Administrative support, case-management assistance and shared system resources free principals to focus on leading rather than paperwork. Models should enable principals to determine the additional school-based supports they need, rather than having these imposed system-wide.

4.4 Provide High-Quality, Principals-Led Professional Learning in Leadership

Enable principals to choose the professional learning that best strengthens their strategic leadership, regulatory understanding and organisational capability, supported by system-aligned expectations. This includes access to self-identified, qualified professional supervision to enhance professional judgement, wellbeing and leadership effectiveness.

4.5 Elevate the Status of the Profession Through National Advocacy

A national campaign to strengthen public understanding of the role of principals would reinforce the respect that underpins autonomy.

CONCLUSION

Principal autonomy is not an optional feature of school leadership. Rather, it is a structural requirement for effective, safe and high-performing primary schools. As Alby Jones argued, freedom and authority must coexist. Without them, principals become administrators rather than leaders, responders rather than strategists, and managers rather than catalysts for learning.

The principal focus-group insights make the stakes clear. Loss of autonomy leads to “lack of innovation,” “loss of identity,” “reduced job

satisfaction,” “risk aversion,” and “inability to respond to local needs”. These are system-level consequences that directly affect student outcomes.

Restoring autonomy is not about shielding principals from accountability. It is about ensuring that accountability does not come at the cost of leadership. It is about creating the conditions in which principals can exercise professional judgement, uphold safe and respectful workplaces and lead with clarity, confidence and purpose. A society and system that expects excellence from its school leaders must also empower them to lead.

AITSL. (2020). *National strategy to address the abuse of teachers, school leaders and other school staff*. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership.

Billett, S., Fogelgarn, R., & Burns, E. (2019). School leaders' work, wellbeing and the challenges of contemporary educational environments. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 57(5), 463–478.

Gavin, M., & McLean, G. (2020). Professional coaching as a developmental intervention for school leaders: A systematic review. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 18(2), 45–62.

Heffernan, A., et al. (2019). Principal decision-making and the pressures of accountability. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 46(2), 293–310.

Jones, A. W. (1978). *The influence of the freedom and authority memorandum on education policy in South Australia*. University of New England.

Leithwood, K., & Sun, J. (2018). Transformational school leadership effects on student achievement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 54(3), 384–418.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22.

OECD. (2019). *TALIS 2018 results: Teachers and school leaders as valued professionals*. OECD Publishing.

OECD. (2024). *TALIS 2024 results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders in Schools Today*. OECD Publishing.

Riley, P. (2019). *The Australian principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing survey 2019*. Australian Catholic University.

Riley, P. (2020). *The Australian principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing survey 2020*. Australian Catholic University.

Published – June 2026

“A society and system that expects excellence from its school leaders must also empower them to lead.”