

'I have been ground down': About 50% of Australian principals and other school leaders are thinking of quitting

March 22 2024, by Paul Kidson, Herb Marsh and Theresa Dicke



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Australia's school principals have collective responsibility for nearly 3 million students and staff. But who takes responsibility for them?

Since 2011, we have been [surveying](#) Australian [school leaders](#)—principals and other leadership staff such as deputy principals and heads of junior or senior schools—about what is happening in their jobs.

Every year we have surveyed between 2,300 and 2,500 participants and it is now the longest running survey of its type in the world.

Previous surveys have shown school principals face unsustainably high workloads, high levels of stress and unacceptable rates of violence and abuse from parents and students.

Our 2023 survey unfortunately finds the work levels, stress and abuse continue. But on top of this, school leaders are experiencing significant levels of mental illness and around half are considering leaving the profession.

Too much work and stress

In the 2023 survey we looked at responses by [career stages](#) to get better insights into Australia's principals.

School leaders vary widely in leadership experience, ranging from early career (up to five years) to more than 20 years in the job. However, across all levels of experience, there are similar levels of high workload (an average of 56 hours per week).

No matter what stage of their career, all told us how the sheer quantity of work and a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning were the top two sources of stress.

Other top concerns were the mental health of students and of staff.

Record levels of violence

Disturbingly, principals also reported the highest levels of violence, bullying and threats of violence since the survey began in 2011:

- 53.9% reported experiencing threats of violence, up from 44.8% in 2022. When asked "from whom", 65.6% of respondents said parents and 79.7% said students
- 48.2% reported experiencing violence, up from 44% in 2022. When asked "from whom", 19.7% said parents and 96.3% said students
- 53.7% reported being subjected to gossip and slander. When asked "from whom", 65.1% said parents and 18.2% said students.

As one school leader told us:

"While I am more than aware that you can't please all of the people, all of the time, I have been ground down by the almost constant negativity, nastiness and violence within our community."

Levels of mental illness are high

We also examined the rates of mental illness among school leaders.

Almost 19% of those surveyed reported moderate-to-severe levels of anxiety. About 18% said they had moderate-to-severe depression. Early-career school leaders were most likely to report higher levels of anxiety and depression.

As one respondent told us:

"I did not work in Term 2 as I reached burn out."

Many are thinking about quitting

Unsurprisingly, given the workload, abuse and [mental health issues](#), the survey found significant numbers of school leaders are rethinking their career options.

More than half (56%) of school leaders surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that "I often seriously consider leaving my current job". Those with six to ten years of experience were most likely to say they were thinking about quitting.

As one survey respondent with a decade of experience as a principal noted:

"I don't feel ready for retirement but can no longer sustain my work as a principal."

Another respondent told us:

"Most nights when I am awake I will count how much longer I have to work before I retire or think about what else I could do instead of this job."

There is some good news

We also looked at principals' resilience, or their ability to bounce back from adverse experiences. Despite all these challenges, principals recorded a moderate increase in their resilience scores. On a 1–5 scale, the average score was over 3.82.

There has been an increase every year since we started tracking resilience in 2017, when the average was 3.58. This is testimony to principals' dedication to their jobs and passion for education.

As one principal said,

"Being a principal is a tough, lonely job with not much appreciation but I continue to do it because the students need us and I love to see the kids challenged, engaged, cared for and learning [...] hopefully to set them up for a great life."

However, we found those with lower resilience scores were more likely to say they intended to quit. This further highlights the importance of supporting school leaders' health and well-being.

We also found principals' job satisfaction levels were stable, having declined last year for the first time since the survey commenced. From a high of 74.84 in 2020, it had dropped to 70.01 by 2022. It is encouraging to note it has risen slightly to 70.23 for 2023.

What needs to happen now

The challenge from this year's report is stark and immediate: an exodus is potentially on the horizon.

Federal and state governments are certainly [aware of teacher shortages](#) and keep announcing measures to try and address them, such as [more administrative support](#) and [pay increases](#).

But greater urgency is needed in current policy responses.

We cannot assume resilience levels will continue to hold up. The signs are unambiguous. If these school leaders really do quit, they will take

years of experience with them and cripple the ability of Australian schools to realize their aspirations.

This includes major [national education policies](#)—such as the upcoming National School Reform Agreement—aimed at boosting academic outcomes and student well-being.

This is why we need the [next education ministers meeting](#) to respond to our report. All federal and state education ministers are expected to meet around April and must make support for principals' well-being and safety a top priority.

As our [survey](#) shows, the patience of Australian school leaders is running out.

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