

OUT OF BALANCE: THE WORKLOAD NEVER STOPS

PRINCIPAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING: POLICY TO PRACTICE SURVEY

Preliminary Report for the Adelaide Symposium 2017



The culture of primary schools ten years ago could well be found in this quote from APPA's report, *In the Balance: the future of Australia's primary schools (2007)* which looked at the resourcing levels of our schools:

“Teachers reported high levels of satisfaction with their role... Even teachers in the most challenging schools with the greatest shortfalls in resources maintained a positive disposition. The culture of primary schools sustains extraordinarily high levels of commitment, efficacy and goodwill.”

The same would likely have been said of primary principals at that time. Today, however, the expectations placed upon schools and the people working within them are 'out of balance'. This survey comment is indicative of the imbalance:

“The workload never stops. It is very difficult to stay proactive in the role. I find things coming at me so fast that it is hard to make a measured decision. I am often reactive. It is also difficult to remain focussed on strategy. Too many distractions...”

The above comment captures the widespread level of concern about the growing complexity, sense of isolation and heavy-duty commitment many primary school principals feel come with their role. Another comment highlights the fighting spirit and self-belief that is also discernible in the many thousands of words of commentary provided by respondents. It does, though, bring a note of caution:

“I would simply say that the greatest personal attributes any prospective or current serving principal must have (are) resilience, the capacity to bounce back from challenges, and the ability to find joy in professional life.”

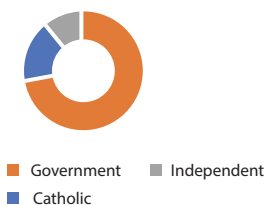
A WIDE RANGE OF RESPONDENTS

929 primary school principals responded to the Policy to Practice survey. Their responses are representative of the 7,200+ primary school leaders in all sectors and jurisdictions across Australia.

Respondents provided biographical and professional information, and answered questions about their roles, the policy environment in which they operate and the practices available to them.

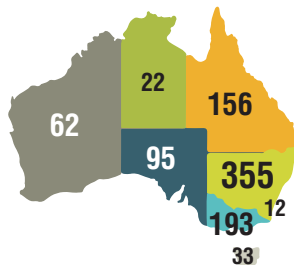
- The gender balance was 60 / 40 female to male with 44% aged between 51 and 60 years with a further 13% over 60 years old.
- Few (<3%) were under 35 years.
- A little over 30% had been in a principal (or deputy / associate principal) role over ten years while another 13% had 21 or more years' experience.
- Many respondents were relatively recent appointments with 65% being appointed to their present positions within the last five years.

Sector



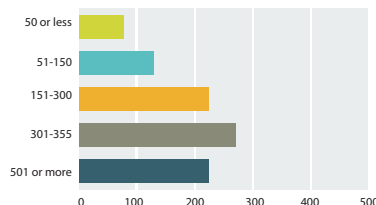
In what state/territory is your school?

Answered: 928 Skipped: 1



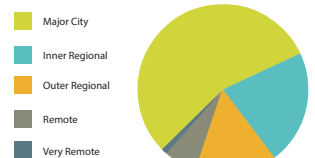
How many students are enrolled in the Primary Years at your school?

Answered: 926 Skipped: 3



Where is your school located?

Answered: 925 Skipped: 4



Above outlines the survey's broad representation of the Australian primary principalship. Well over 650 respondents offered multiple comments to articulate their personal context and experience. In fact, the 3,246 individual comments have seen detailed and insightful data gathered. This attests to the strength and validity of the survey.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING NOW AND IN FIVE YEARS TIME

Respondents were asked to self-assess their health and wellbeing status across three stages – in the current or most recent school term; while in their current position; in five years time if continuing in current position.

The mean score of respondents, when considering their health and wellbeing in the current or most recent school term, was below average (2.84). The percentage of respondents rating themselves as having above average health was 28%. This is considerably below the 56% ABS figure of Australians considering themselves in very good or excellent health.

There is little gender difference in self-assessed health scores. Across the three stages, for females the average is 2.78 and for males it's 2.95. Only 12 individual principals were able to rate their health and

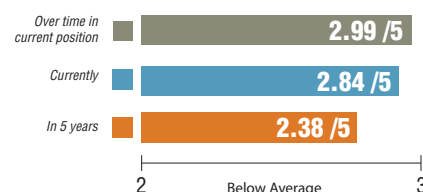
wellbeing as well above average in each of the three stages.

Significant concerns arise when considering what scores respondents gave in predicting their health and wellbeing in five years time should they continue in their current position. Of the 923 who answered this question, 206 (or 22%) said well below average. This compares with just 57 (or 6%) who rated their health well below average over the time in their current role. What also needs to be considered is that, when combining below and well below, there are 437 (or 47%) respondents who see themselves having either below or well below average health in five years time. Across Australia, there is a serious and troubling situation that needs urgent investigation.

Older principals, those over sixty, are the only age group to rate their health as above average (3.03).

Compared to other age cohorts, 20 to 35-year-old principals believe their health will deteriorate least in the next five years.

Health and Wellbeing Assessment



Clearly, primary principals believe their health and wellbeing has deteriorated, and will deteriorate further, should they stay in their current position. If it continues, we will see increasing early retirements and fewer applicants for leadership positions.

WORKPLACE AND POLICY

The comparison of how primary principals viewed working with employer and system policy environments was different between Government and non-Government settings. Just over half (54%) of Government school principals reported their policy environment was supportive and allowed their school to be effective while the figure was 87% for Independent and 77% Catholic principals.

The group with the smallest number reporting a supportive policy environment were principals who had been in the position more than twenty years (44%). However, more principals of this group believed they had a greater ability to influence and change policy (53%) than their less experienced colleagues.

More Independent primary principals (89%) believed

they had the ability to influence and change policy than those in any other cohort. There was a wide range of views between sectors and jurisdictions on this issue.

Almost 70% of principals have leadership coaching (short term, task based) available while mentoring (long term, relational) is available to just over half. These practices were valued by almost 85% of principals and available regardless of school sector or location.

Non-teaching executive support is available to 56% of primary principals. The figures, however, vary significantly between sectors (48% Government, 82% Independent, Catholic 69%). Whether available or not, 90% of primary principals value non-teaching executive support.

Where non-teaching executive support is used, respondents rated their health as above average (3.02) while those without that support had a lower self-assessment (2.57).

Job sharing is not widely available to primary principals (15%). Very few Independent primary principals (6%), for example, can job share. On the other hand, 20% of deputy or associate principals have this employment option. Overall, 49% of all primary principals value job sharing.

All ACT primary principals rated their policy environment as supportive. Under half (47%) from NSW reported they operate in a supportive policy environment.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND COMPLIANCE

While the survey didn't ask for views on the importance or otherwise of accountability, there is widespread acceptance within the profession and across the community that schools and principals are accountable and must be able to demonstrate that accountability in numerous ways.

There is no cohort of primary school principals in Australia who do not believe their accountability workload is increasing. Overwhelmingly, respondents agreed (20%) or agreed strongly (76%) with this proposition. In contrast, fewer than 4% were neutral or disagreed with the proposition.

This is a substantial issue at a school, system and government level given the impact on workload (see next section). It is seen to remove principals from their core responsibilities.

Respondent comments on accountability and compliance are revealing. There is little doubt that the increase is significant and having a deleterious impact upon their capacity to lead teaching and learning, implement successful change and manage personal workload and the workload of staff. Furthermore, it is apparent that the increasing demands of accountability and compliance are having a detrimental effect on primary principals' health and wellbeing.

This sample of personal reflections explains how the requirements tied to accountability are impacting on health and wellbeing:

"The responsibilities given to a principal are many and varied. There are too many compliance requirements for schools / principals to do their core business."

"I feel the expectation of accountability has more than quadrupled in the last two years. The role of principal has greatly moved away from leadership and the management of children, staff and community to accountability based forms and ticking boxes."

"Constant accountability allows little time for relaxation."

"The principal role is becoming increasingly unmanageable with rising accountability requirements and workload without increasing support or resources. This year in particular has been stressful and I have often felt I could just walk out and quit!"

"Decreasing support of parents, increasing accountability and expectations are resulting in spending unprecedented time and energy justifying and defending decisions and actions."

THE DEMANDS OF THE JOB

“This role would kill me, if I let it.”

Over recent years, primary schools have been affected by, for example, societal change and family pressures, technological advancement and the growth of social media, increased attention on education with raised parental expectations, and the focus on national and international student achievement comparisons. Schools have to ‘keep up’ with a growing knowledge of how the brain works and how children learn. In addition, there has been the introduction of a national curriculum, the teacher and principal professional standards, increased professional development requirements, national testing and, as noted earlier, more in the way of compliance and accountability measures. One principal wrote:

“Continuous change, reform and restructuring often require large amounts of extra work, especially accountability responsibilities.”

This consumes time that would otherwise (have) been spent working with families, staff and students. The extra workload seems to be building year by year without any space to get on with the business of running our schools. The effects of principal workload limit my capacity to engage in the more meaningful (and) interpersonal tasks that make the school a nurturing and engaging environment. Recently, the workload is so large that there is little room for self-care and very little job satisfaction.”

When asked, *Overall, I feel able to work with the employer and systemic policies that allow my school to be effective*, 61% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. However, 17% were at the opposite end of the spectrum. These principals do not believe they are able to work with the policies available to them to provide effective schooling. The

size of this group would indicate their response is not likely to be competency related. They rate their health and wellbeing below their colleagues in all categories at present (2.27), in their current position (2.69) and in five years (1.60). Their professional situation is almost certainly harming their health. The following comment emphasises the untenable situation for many principals today:

“I have reached the point where I cannot relax my thoughts about what has to be done at school. It is extremely isolating and a phone call to a peer is certainly NOT the answer. Nobody has time for a good conversation. I do not have home time and wake everyday knowing I’m getting further behind; it’s overwhelming and so hard not to drain staff with extra. I’m putting out spot fires, living on the edge; not doing one thing well. Exhausting, tiring.”

THE POLICY AND PRACTICE PRIMARY PRINCIPALS VALUE

Respondents were asked to consider nineteen practices that provided professional, personal and role support, and indicate the availability, use and value of each. A practice that was ‘not available’ could still be rated as ‘valued’. A practice that was ‘used’ could also be rated as ‘not valued’. (It should be noted that a definition of each practice was not provided in the survey and could therefore mean some differences in interpretation.)

The most valued practice was the authority to use school-based decisions and processes in employing staff (95%). This was also widely available (89%) and used more than other practices (90%).

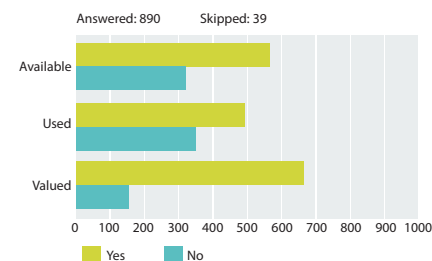
Other highly valued practices (>90%) included school-based teacher allocation, school-based staff management, professional development in

teaching and learning, support for school leader networks, support for professional associations and non-teaching executive support. The most available practice was the use of school review and improvement processes managed by employer / system (94%). It was used by 85% of respondents and valued by 73%. This is a low level of ‘value’ compared to many other practices.

Employee assistance services provided by either the employer or an external provider were relatively widely available (87% and 66% respectively) though used by far fewer (40% and 27%). While what these services might offer could be quite different across the many jurisdictions and sectors both were valued far higher than they were used (79% and 70%). Similarly, while only 29% of respondents had used extended leave, many more valued the practice (82%).

Survey comments suggest that, when valued practices are available principals will use them as required but, as importantly, will see themselves as being trusted, respected and supported.

Line management practices focussed on support and development



WHAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Primary principals lead complex organisations. Their health and wellbeing is a central component of the efficacy of school programs. Those who are operating in a supportive policy environment have a mean self-assessed health score of 3.09 while those in a non-supportive policy environment have a mean self-assessed health score of 2.34.

Significantly, principals who can influence and change their policy environment scored their health at 3.12 while those without that power gave themselves a lower score (2.53).

Analysis of responses where principals recognised they could rely on system or employer support in relation to student behaviour, staff performance and parental issues was informative. The less than 20% of principals who could rely on such support in all three

areas produced a mean score of 3.29 for their health and wellbeing. This compared to a mean score of 2.52 for the 10% of respondents who reported they couldn't rely on such support across all areas.

When commenting on some of the issues a principal confronts each day in this area, one respondent said:

“Clearly, the stress of managing relationships within the school – parents, staff and students – is a huge impact. Poor performing staff, high and sometimes unreasonable expectations from parents / carers, and poor behaviour from students all have a huge impact.”

Also significant was the situation for around 40% of respondents who either disagreed or strongly

disagreed that they received support for implementing policies related to poorly performing staff members.

A comparison between those agreeing they received this support with those disagreeing showed a mean difference of 0.59 in self-assessed health and wellbeing (3.22 as compared to 2.63). Comments reflecting this situation highlight the need for effective staff performance management.

“Management of unsatisfactory performance of staff is a huge burden on principals and support is ‘weak’. We are asked to hold teachers to account (re professional standards and performance) yet actually doing so is incredibly difficult.”

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE...

The question asking what changes respondents would make to the role of principal drew 664 comments. This was more than for any other written response question. 30% of comments mentioned the need to decrease the amount of red tape, paperwork and 'administrivia'. This is in line with the fact that over 95% of primary principals believe their accountability workload is increasing.

- **Decrease administrivia. Employ business managers and appoint one to all schools, with small schools sharing the role.**
- **Take away a lot of the paperwork. For example, WHS and policy compliance. Have someone employed in schools to help schools manage this.**
- **Move the accountability and compliance elsewhere so I can lead learning like I did ten years ago.**

Changes proposed by respondents included exploring other methods and processes for meeting some OH&S / WHS, Human Resources, and plant and facilities compliance requirements. Just on 25% of respondents recommended more 'support' for primary principals with student behaviour, staff performance

and parent issues most often mentioned. The support requested was not only in the form of increased staffing levels. Strengthening of principal authority in these areas through changed policy settings was also mentioned.

- **Ability to hire staff and manage poor performers more appropriately.**
- **Employ an accountant to manage the accounting finance package that is now in schools. Employ a pastoral care support person to manage student and family welfare and mental health needs. Free up time for the principal to lead learning and be seen as a lead learner across the school by students, staff and community.**
- **Support with bullying of principals by aggressive parents through social media.**

Just under 10% of respondents directly suggested changes that would alleviate excessive workload. Many referred to the provision of a personal, administrative or executive assistant to the principal in primary schools as a necessary change.

THE LAST WORD...

Australian primary principals know that to be highly effective they must be healthy and have a good level of personal wellbeing. For this to be a reality in the school setting, the policies and practices must be fit for purpose, available, used and valued. Principals accept responsibility for the lifestyle and professional choices they make. However, as the survey shows, they understand that their health and wellbeing can be, and is being, affected by their role as a school leader and by the policy environment in which they work.

APPA's Policy to Practice Survey is a 'wake up call'. Principals need to devote energy to keeping physically, mentally and emotionally well. However, what's clear is that the expectations placed on schools, together with demanding accountability and compliance measures, have increased hugely. Additionally, parental aspirations have never been higher at a time of a global uncertainty, economic concerns and high youth joblessness in Australia. In amongst this we know that primary schools are complex organisations with limited available resources. They need solid support and good structures as well as the time and resources in place to support our primary school principals in leading their schools.

Good schools are **"characterised by dedicated school leaders and teachers with high expectations of student learning, and communities that respect and value education"** (APPA Charter on Primary Schooling). Principals must be able to rely upon clear, practical and well targeted employer, system and government policy and practice.

This comment is typical:

"A lack of trust and support makes dealing with the complex issues of leading schools very isolating, adding significantly to stress levels and having a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of principals. Principals are struggling in the role and leaving in increasing numbers."

It does not need to be so. Systemic and employer trust and support is not too much for any professional, para-professional or volunteer working in primary schools to expect. Principals stand ready to play their part in making 'trust and support' the new reality.

NOTES TO THE PRELIMINARY REPORT

THE FINAL REPORT

The Final Report of the Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey: Policy to Practice will be released at the APPA 2017 National Conference in Brisbane on the 12th September.

MEASURING OUR HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Self-assessed health status is a commonly used measure of overall health and aims to reflect a person's perception of his or her own health at a given point in time. It is a useful and valid measure of a person's current health status, as well as providing a broad picture of a population's overall health.

In 2011-12, over half of all Australians aged 15 years and over considered themselves to be in very good or excellent health (55.1%), while 4.0% rated their health as poor. There was no significant change in the way Australians rated their overall health between 2007-08 and 2011-12.

Men and women showed no differences in the way they assessed their overall health in 2011-12. (ABS 2011 Census Report)

USE OF QUOTES

We have used a number of quotes in this paper. While endeavouring to use quotes from a range of respondents, individuals or their context (state / territory or sector) have intentionally not been identified.

WHY USE MEAN SCORES

Respondents rated their self-assessed health and wellbeing on a five point scale (1 – 5) where 1 is well below average, 2 is below average, 3 is average, 4 is above average and 5 is well above average. The mean score for this 5-point scale is 3 equating to average health and wellbeing. The mean score is a good measure of the average for these data because it

identifies a single value as representative of the entire group and includes every response.

ROUNDING

When reading the survey findings, percentages have generally been rounded.

THE SCALE

When asking for a rating to particular issues (satisfaction, support received, etc) a five-point scale has been used – strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree.

Where respondents used this scale to agree or disagree with statements about policy or practice, the use of mean scores would not provide useful data. Instead these survey items are analysed by comparing the percentage of respondents at each point on the scale.

Produced with the generous support of Camp Australia

