



# PRINCIPAL

## HEALTH & WELLBEING SURVEY

**Australian Principal  
Occupational Health, Safety  
& Wellbeing Survey  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**2011 – 2014 Data  
December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

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Produced and Published by:

Faculty of Education and Arts  
Institute for Positive Psychology and Education  
Centre for Teacher Quality and Leadership  
Australian Catholic University  
Fitzroy, Victoria, Australia, 3605  
Printed November 2014

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## Acknowledgements

Projects on this scale do not happen without a number of dedicated people's support. I would like to firstly thank the *Teachers Health Fund* who became the major sponsor of the research in 2014. Without the strong support of CEO Bradley Joyce, Chief Marketing Officer Kate Talty and National Industry Development Manager, Jane Stower this report would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the National Principal Organisations and their affiliates for their cash contributions to funding the project along with in-kind resources, and a determination to see the project run. They have also provided the essential function of facilitated access to the survey for the principals and deputy/assistant principals in their jurisdictions. Special thanks go to project manager, research assistant and PhD student, Aimee Maxwell who worked tirelessly to tight deadlines time and again. For Web development and report construction thanks go to Jason Cleeland. A big thank you also goes to the members of the project consultative committee, who each contributed many hours of thought, travel for meetings and invaluable questions along with discussion. It is a much better product for their efforts.

## 2014 Consultative committee

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## Executive Summary & Recommendations

### Background

This is a short summary of the background to the project, which was published in the 2011 Data Report (available at: [www.principalhealth.org.au/reports](http://www.principalhealth.org.au/reports)). In the UK, where schools have been increasingly accountable for results via the publication of league tables, Phillips and Sen (2011) reported that, “work related stress was higher in education than across all other industries... with work-related mental ill-health... almost double the rate for all industry” (p. 177-8). A significant stressor has been the increased emphasis by governments on accountability for uniform curriculum delivery along with the devolution of administrative tasks from central to local control.

The work practices (role demands) imposed by these changes further increase work volume and public accountability and decrease principals and deputy/assistant principals’ decision latitude through externally imposed reporting deadlines. Extensive research on similar professional populations, middle ranking public servants in the UK, reported in more than 100 Whitehall I and II studies found adverse health outcomes including decreased life expectancy results from high role demand and concurrent low decision latitude. More disturbing is that under these conditions younger people appear to be at greater risk of coronary heart disease than their older colleagues (Kuper & Marmot, 2003).

### Project Aims

The aim of this research project is to conduct a longitudinal study monitoring school principals and deputy/assistant principals’ and deputy/assistant principals and deputy/assistant principals’ health and wellbeing annually. Principals and deputy/assistant principals’ health and wellbeing in differing school types, levels and size will be monitored along with lifestyle choices such as exercise and diet and the professional and personal social support networks available to individuals. The turnover of principals and deputy/assistant principals within schools will allow investigations of moderator effects, such as years of experience prior to taking up the role. The longitudinal study will allow the mapping of health outcomes on each of these dimensions over time.

### Participant Care

Each survey participant received a comprehensive, individual report from his/her own survey responses. The report is an interactive secure webpage allowing participants to compare their scores on 43 separated dimensions with the general population and other principals.

### Chief Investigator

Associate Professor Philip Riley, from Australian Catholic University, a registered psychologist with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, oversaw the project. He is a former school principal and is also the Chief Investigator for *The Irish Principals and Deputy Principals Health and Wellbeing Survey*. The Irish survey was conducted using the same protocols as the Australian survey, which has run annually in Australia since 2011.

### The Survey

The survey captured three types of information drawn from existing robust and widely used instruments. First, comprehensive school demographic items drawn from the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS) (Williams, et al., 2007), *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA) (Thomson, et al., 2011), The MySchool Website (ACARA) and *International Confederation of Principals* surveys were used to capture differences in occupational health and

safety (OH&S) associated with the diversity of school settings and types. Second, personal demographic and historical information was captured. Third, principals and deputy/assistant principals' quality of life and psychosocial coping were investigated, by employing three widely used measures, the *Assessment of Quality of Life – 8D (AQoL-8D)*: Richardson, et al., 2009; Richardson, Iezzi & Maxwell, 2014), *The Copenhagen PsychoSocial Coping Scale-II (COPSOQ-II)*: Jan Hyld Pejtersen, et al., 2010) and *The Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI)*: Cummins, et al., 2003). Alcohol use was measured using *The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT)*: Babour et al., 2001), developed for the World Health Organization. The combination of items from these instruments allows opportunities for comprehensive analysis of variation in both OH&S and wellbeing as a function of school type, sector differences and the personal attributes of the principals themselves.

## Innovation

The principals and deputy/assistant principals who completed the survey received interactive feedback through a dedicated secure website, affording them instant health and wellbeing checkups tailored to their specific work context. In future iterations of the survey it is hoped that we can incorporate feedback to individuals using like-group comparisons. The instant benefit to individuals is likely to increase both participation rates and the veracity of the information they submit.

## Research Questions

The specific research questions guiding the initial survey were:

Can recognizable occupational health, safety and wellbeing subgroups of principals and deputy/assistant principals be identified through the survey? These groups may be inferred from a number of criteria including: Sector; Location (Urban, Suburban, Large Town, Rural, Remote); Type (Primary, Secondary, Special, Early Childhood,); Background (Family of Origin, School Education); Person Factors (Gender, Family of Origin and Procreation, Social Support, Educational Level); Role Factors (Hours worked, number and type of teachers, students and parents, resources, professional support); Occupational Constraints.

1. Do(es) any group(s) thrive in the role?
2. Do(es) any group(s) only just survive in the role?
3. Do(es) any group(s) show signs of adverse health, safety, and wellbeing outcomes.
4. Do(es) any factors affect these group(s), and in what ways?
5. Are changes to educational policy or policy implementation suggested by the results?

## Australia's School Principals: A 4-year Longitudinal Snapshot

1. Over the 4-years of the survey to date, responses have been collected from 2,621 Principals and 1,024 Deputy/assistant principals. This represents approximately 26% of all principals in the country with ~20-25% completing the survey each year. It is impossible to calculate the number of assistants/deputies in the country as they are not in all schools, and many large schools have more than one deputy/assistant, so no divisor exists to make the calculation. However the raw numbers suggest a good proportion of those eligible to take part did.
2. 64.8% primary;
3. ~19% in urban locations, 39-42% in suburban locations, ~13% in large towns, ~25% in rural and ~3.5-4% in remote locations;
4. 55.6-57.1% female;
5. Average age 51-53 years: Ranging from 24 years in 2011 – 78 years in 2014.
6. Most had been in their current role for 5-5.6 years and leadership roles for ~13 years, following ~12 more years in teaching.
7. Approximately 50% work upwards of 56 hours per week during term with ~13% working upwards of 66 hours per week. During school holidays, ~55% work upwards of 25 hours per week.

8. Annual salaries range from <\$50,000 - >\$160,000 per annum with a disproportionate number of women in lower paid roles.
9. ~86% rate personal achievement as very important or higher.
10. ~97% rate personal relationships with family and friends as very important or higher.
11. >90% are in a partner relationship, and ~82% report that their greatest source of support comes from their partner. ~40% of their partners also work in the education sector.
12. ~56% have children living at home.
13. ~25% of the principals and deputy/assistant principals have a family member with a long-term health condition, with serious impact on the family in 20-25% of the sample.
14. They appear to come from stable backgrounds ~88% were living with a mother and father at age 14.
15. They have been upwardly mobile and value education for themselves as well as others: The families of origin appear to be largely working class with about 63% of participants' parents qualified with a university degree, whereas 33% of the principals and deputy/assistant principals have a masters degree or above, mostly in formal leadership courses.
16. ~45% volunteer their time for community support outside of their role, and approximately the same number are active members of formal community or sporting associations.
17. ~30% conduct regular spiritual practice.
18. There are large differences in their self-reported maintenance of healthy levels of exercise, diet and weight control.
19. Only ~80% of respondents rate their own happiness as very important or higher.
20. They are generally positive about their job and report higher job satisfaction than the population
21. 49% are taking prescription medication for a diagnosed condition.
22. Most maintain a healthy alcohol intake, and do not use it to manage stress.
23. Principals experience high levels of emotional demands and emotional labour when compared to the general population. This is correlated with higher levels of burnout and stress symptoms (difficulty sleeping, somatic symptoms)
24. The greatest source of stress for all principals and deputies/assistants in every state and every sector is the sheer quantity of work, closely followed by a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning.
25. Principals and deputy/assistant principals experience far higher prevalence of offensive behaviour at work than the general population: adult-adult bullying (4-times higher); threats of violence (5-times higher); and, actual violence (7-times the rate of the general population) measured on the COPSOQ-II. The prevalence rates vary from state to state with the Northern Territory and Western Australia reporting the highest levels.
26. Despite having many predictive attributes for high scores on health and wellbeing (COPSOQ-II; Personal Wellbeing Index) and quality of life (Assessment of Quality of Life-8D) measures, collectively principals and deputy/assistant principals score less than the general population on all positive measures (self-rated health; happiness; mental health; coping; relationships; self-worth; personal wellbeing index) and higher on all negative measures (burnout; stress; sleeping troubles; depressive symptoms; somatic stress symptoms; cognitive stress symptoms). The differences are detailed in the full report.

## ***Recommendations***

The recommendations are designed to help policy makers, (including: government; employer groups; professional associations; unions; school boards and governors) improve both working conditions for the paid work force and learning conditions for students, as the two are inseparable (Leithwood, 2006). The recommendations are grouped under thematic headings that emerged from the data analysis. While there are particular challenges to the occupational health, safety and wellbeing of principals and deputy/assistant principals which result from contextual and geographical determinates, the recommendations below, relate to more general occupational conditions found across the country in every state and school sector. Recommendations A-C are relatively straightforward and consistent



with evidence from other countries showing that professional support for principals provides many benefits that flow through to improved student learning outcomes.

Recommendation D addresses the most complex and challenging findings from the first longitudinal analysis carried out on the data collected to date: maintenance of dignity at work. The results suggest that the need to look for the causes, and reduce the levels, of adult-to-adult bullying, threats of, and actual physical violence in schools is required. Given that this report reflects four years of consistent results drawn from approximately one-third of all principals in the country, the need to address these issues is important. If subsequent waves of data collection show a similar pattern, repeating consistently over time, stakeholders responsible for addressing these issues can be even more confident of the findings and the need to implement Recommendation D in a timely manner.

With regard to Recommendation D, the results may reflect Australian society more broadly, rather than school culture specifically. Evidence of offensive behaviour in other Australian social workplaces, such as hospitals, suggests that this might be the case. The population figures used for comparisons are drawn from a number of large population studies conducted in Europe. However, if governments and employer groups are committed to improving the quality of school education for all stakeholders, this issue needs attention. Reducing levels of offensive behaviour will produce significant educational gains for students. Previous research has shown that the most effective ways to prevent or diminish bullying and violence are through whole school approaches (Antonio & Salzfass, 2007; Dake et al., 2003; de Wet, 2010; Espelage et al., 2013; Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2001). The research presented in this report suggests the problem is system-wide and therefore a system-wide approach is also needed.

### **Recommendation A: Improving the wellbeing of principals and deputy/assistant principals through Professional Support**

Principals and deputy/assistant principals mostly learn how to deal with the demanding emotional aspects of the role on the job, rather than through systematic preparation. In other professions, such as psychology and social work, where highly charged emotional interactions occur, high levels of professional support and debriefing are standard procedure. This is not so in education. As a result, the average principals' and deputy/assistant principals' wellbeing survey scores are lower than the average citizen. However, there is a lot of variation and distinct differences between the principals and deputy/assistant principals who appear to be coping well with the complexity of the role and those who are not. Professional support is a strong predictor of coping with the stresses of the role (job demands). Therefore, policies need to be developed that address this issue directly. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, no principals and deputy/assistant principals should feel unsupported in the face of growing job complexity, increased scrutiny stress from public accountability and decreased control over the ways in which the accountability targets are met (Riley & Langan-Fox, 2013).

The evidence from the cluster analysis in the 2011 report and the findings of this survey clearly point to the benefits of professional support for all principals and deputy/assistant principals. Those who receive the least have the greatest challenges to maintain their mental health. The principals and deputy/assistant principals identified as coping least well with their daily tasks had the lowest levels of professional support from colleagues and superiors while those who coped the best reported the highest levels of professional support. This is an area of improvement that would be relatively easy for education systems to improve.

1. Provide opportunities for principals and deputy/assistant principals to engage in professional support networks on a regular basis.
2. Networks would need to be determined locally, contextually and formally, and provide opportunities for informal support alongside formal support, outlined in Recommendation B.
3. A provision of time for principals and deputy/assistant principals to build and maintain professional support networks would be needed.

4. This could be augmented by experienced principal mentors, perhaps retired principals, visiting schools to provide support in the form of professional conversations (“agenda-less” meetings) allowing school principals and deputy/assistant principals time to discuss the day-to-day functioning of their schools with a sympathetic, experienced colleague.

## **Recommendation B. Professional Learning**

Systematic attention needs to be paid to the professional learning of principals and deputy/assistant principals, as targeted professional support. There is a considerable need for skill development in the emotional aspects of the leadership role outlined in Recommendation A: dealing with the highs and lows associated with the emotional investment of parents in their children. In-service provision of education on the emotional aspects of teaching, learning, organizational function, emotional labour, dealing with difficulties and conflicts in the workplace, employee assistance programs, debriefing self and others would be a great benefit.

Targeted professional learning is likely to make principals and deputy/assistant principals feel better supported than they currently report. Provision of ongoing professional learning is likely to assist all principals and deputy/assistant principals in two ways. First, by skill improvement and secondly through the benefits of increased perceptions of support outlined in Recommendation A.

## **Recommendation C. Review the work practices of Principals and deputy/assistant principals in light of the Job Demands-Resources Model of organizational health**

Stress and psychological risk at work can be conceptualised through the balance of job *demands* (e.g., workload, time pressures, physical environment, emotional labour) and job *resources* (e.g., feedback, rewards, control, job security, support). The Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) along with the Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989 (Halbesleben, 2006; Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993) posit that work demands and available resources need to be in balance for good psychological health at work. High job demands lead to exhaustion while low job resources lead to disengagement, both symptoms of job burnout. However, high job resources buffer job demands, reducing their negative impact on individuals. Principals and deputies/assistants report very high demands, out of balance with available resources to buffer the demands.

The average hours spent at work by principals and deputies/assistants ranges between 51-60 hours per week during term time and 25-30 hours per week during gazetted holiday periods. Too many participants in the survey are working too many hours and it is taking a toll on their greatest support group; their families. Work-Family conflict occurs at approximately double the rate for the population generally. The amount of emotional labour expected of principals and deputies/assistants is 1.7-times that of the population. When job demands are this high, they need to be balanced with significant resources to buffer the demands. Therefore all stakeholders need to be consulted about ways in which this can be achieved. Obvious, but unlikely to be funded, examples of reducing job demands would be job sharing. However, working groups tasked with addressing the issues of job demands may identify lower cost and equally effective solutions to job sharing. What is clear is that this level of demand is dangerous to the long-term health and wellbeing of principals who find consistently that the resources available to them are not concomitant with the demands.

## **Recommendation D: Address Bullying and Violence**

There is an urgent need to establish an independent authority to investigate three types of offensive behavior identified as consistently occurring in schools:

1. adult-adult bullying (occurring at 4-times the rate of the general population);
2. threats of violence (occurring at 5-times the rate of the general population); and,
3. actual violence (occurring at 7-times the rate of the general population).



The authority should be independent from all stakeholder groups in schools and government. Specifically, the task force should investigate:

1. differences in the occupational risk of the different types of principals and deputy/assistant principals, to determine who are most at risk, why and what can be done to protect them.
2. whether/how the risk also extends to teachers and students.
3. Governance structures, information flow between adults, and external influences on school functioning.
4. The authority should have powers to interview teachers, parents and students.

The consequences of offensive behaviour in schools are likely to become costly for employers, through time lost to ill health, OH&S claims against employers' responsibility for not providing a safe working environment and reduced functioning while at work as a result of the high levels of offensive behavior in the workplace. Therefore the investment in such a taskforce may prove to be the least expensive option in relation to this issue. The cost to mental health is high. Price Waterhouse Coopers have recently conducted a Return on Investment for addressing mental health in the workplace. They found that the impact of not addressing it amounted to \$10.6 billion annually (see, <http://www.headsup.org.au/creating-a-mentally-healthy-workplace/the-business-case>). However, they also reported that every dollar spent on addressing the issue returned \$2.30. So addressing the problem in schools is also a good investment for the future of the nation.

## Summary

Principals, deputy/assistant principals and teachers deal daily with parents' greatest hopes and deepest fears: the lives and potential futures of their children. While this is recognized in the law of *loco parentis*, the emotional consequences remain under-researched (Hargreaves, 2013; Woolfolk Hoy, 2013). This means high levels of emotion are attached to many aspects of school functioning, and principals and deputy/assistant principals have to learn how to deal with this on the job, rather than through systematic preparation. This can be particularly difficult for principals and deputy/assistant principals who must communicate the way education policy is both developed and practiced to teachers, parents and students, sometimes in emotionally charged situations. The difficulties between the adult stakeholders in schools that have been consistently reported in every year of the survey need to be acknowledged and dealt with on a more systematic basis. Systematic attention also needs to be paid to the professional learning of principals and deputy/assistant principals, and presumably teachers, in the emotional aspects of their roles and the emotional investment of parents in their children, which may underlie the high rate of violence and threats principals and deputy/assistant principals are experiencing. In-service provision of education on the emotional aspects of teaching, learning, organizational function, emotional labour, dealing with difficulties and conflicts in the workplace, employee assistance programs, debriefing self and others appears to be urgently needed.