



INVISIBLE LABOUR: PRINCIPALS' EMOTIONAL LABOUR IN VOLATILE TIMES

REPORT TWO:
THE EMOTIONAL
LABOUR OF THE
SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

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emotional labour

noun

1. the mental activity required to manage or perform the routine tasks necessary for maintaining relationships and ensuring smooth running of a household or process, typically regarded as an unappreciated or unacknowledged burden borne disproportionately by women.

2. the management of one's emotions in order to present oneself and interact with other people in a certain way while doing a job. (Oxford Languages, 2025)

This research project is dedicated to the 6,727 public schools and their educators across Australia.

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We acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we work and live. Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people, communities of the Kulin Nation, who are the ongoing custodians of the lands on which Monash University now stands, the Ancestors and Elders of Wadawurrung Country, Eastern Maar Country and Wurundjeri Country, where Deakin University's physical campuses are located and the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation on which the University of Sydney now stands.

THE RESEARCH TEAM

This four-year project (2022–2026) is funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP230100594) led by Monash University in collaboration with Deakin University and the University of Sydney. The research team comprises Lead Investigator Professor Jane Wilkinson, Chief Investigators Professor Lucas Walsh, Professor Amanda Keddie, Dr Fiona Longmuir and Dr Christine Grice, and Research Fellows Dr Philippa Chandler and Tim Delany.

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Executive Summary

The findings of this report are based on an Australian Research Council [ARC] Discovery Grant (DP230100594) research project: *Invisible Labour: Principals' Emotional Labour in Volatile Times*. The study is a collaboration between Monash University, Deakin University and the University of Sydney. The report is the second in a series examining the emotional labour of Australian public-school principals amid increasing social, political and environmental volatilities.

Drawing on 298 critical incident testimonies from 256 principals, as well as stakeholder interviews, case studies and a policy audit, the study reveals how principals' emotional labour – often invisible and unacknowledged – has intensified and become central to their role. The research highlights the toll this labour takes on principals' health, wellbeing and professional sustainability and calls for systemic reform to acknowledge and better support the emotional demands of their role.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1. *Wearing a Professional Mask:*** Principals routinely suppress personal emotions to maintain calm and professionalism. Surface and deep acting are common, leading to emotional exhaustion and burnout. Isolation and lack of emotional support exacerbate stress, especially during crises.
- 2. *Diverse Geographies of Emotional Labour:*** Emotional labour varies significantly by context. Rural and remote principals face isolation, resource scarcity and community-wide trauma. Indigenous principals carry a “colonial load” (APPA & NATSIPA, 2025) navigating cultural tensions and systemic neglect. Principals in low SES schools confront structural inequities, heightened emotional demands and systemic underfunding.
- 3. *Bodily Impacts of Emotional Labour:*** Emotional labour manifests physically: sleeplessness, illness, trauma and even injury. Principals often act as first responders—performing roles akin to police, paramedics and counsellors. The resulting physical and emotional toll is compounded by inadequate support and recognition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Macro

(National Level)

1. Implement full funding of public schools across Australia to 100% of the SRS by the end of the current federal government term.
2. Redress the inequality between government and non-government sectors. This extends from choice in student enrolment to the heightened accountabilities in which public-school principals are held more publicly accountable.
3. Convene a national policy roundtable involving state and federal system leaders, principal associations and principal union representatives to audit policies that define and describe principal work.
4. Add principals to The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan as a distinct category to recognise and respond to the distinctive nature of their role.
5. Encourage Australian federal, state and territory governments to work collectively with principal associations, teacher unions and Safe Work Australia (which develops national policy relating to workplace health and safety) to ensure appropriate Workplace Health and Safety controls for physical and psychosocial workplace harms are legislated and resourced in each state and territory.
6. Review and update AITSL's Professional Standard for Principals (Principal Standard) to better reflect the diverse leadership challenges principals face and the range of skills needed.
7. Research the costs of principal and teacher attrition in public schools and in particular, 'hard to staff' schools that are typically in highly disadvantaged communities.
8. Compile proactive examples of good practice in supporting the principalship without reducing these examples to a one-size fits all, "what works" formula.

Meso

(State/Territory Level)

1. Review position descriptions to more accurately reflect the emotional labour of principals.
2. Recognise principals as first responders.
3. Ensure that all principals receive education and training in managing critical incidents, such as natural disasters, in their communities. Schools and their leaders typically form a major hub in crisis responses (particularly in regional, rural and remote communities).
4. Amend state and territory principal role descriptions to incorporate a government accountability structure for principal wellbeing.
5. Take responsibility for the induction, support and mentoring of principals specifically in human resourcing, governance, occupational health and safety, and resourcing and maintenance.
6. Reduce the volume of principals' work during critical incidents by decreasing lengthy bureaucracy and procedures.
7. Diversify the principal workforce.
8. Reconsider the equity of the staffing model for small schools and the added social complexity in large schools, particularly in low SES areas, to support principals during and after critical incidents.
9. Ensure that all principals receive education and training in regard to all aspects of safety in schools for historically excluded groups: Indigenous, girls and women, people of diverse sexualities, those with disabilities, those living in poverty, African-Australians.
10. Provide funding and personnel to support principals and schools to build strong school/community/caregiver partnerships – particularly crucial in highly disadvantaged communities which suffer disproportionately from high principal turnover.
11. Implement flexible working arrangements as an important option for carrying out the principals' role.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Micro

(School Level)

1. Provide timely and close medical and mental health support after a critical incident as well as adequate leave time.
2. Offer professional respite and flexible working arrangements post-critical incidents.
3. Establish and fund formal support networks for principals with other principal colleagues across systems of public schools, particularly in rural and remote areas and in schools with high levels of social disadvantage.
4. Increase capacity for principals to access professional supervision at all times and not just during critical incidents.
5. Provide greater support to small rural schools by rethinking regional governance.
6. Provide coaching and supervision focused on emotional labour and staff management.
7. Establish peer support networks and access to clinical supervision for principals at all career stages.
8. Invest in school-parent and community partnerships, with funded training and support, especially in disadvantaged areas.

IN SUMMARY

Australian public-school principals are deeply committed to their communities, often at great personal cost. Their emotional labour is vital yet undervalued. This report calls for a reconceptualisation of the principalship – one that acknowledges its intensified emotional demands and principals' role as first responders. Systemic change is essential to ensure principals are supported, retained and empowered to lead schools that foster equity and social justice.

01

INTRODUCTION

Australian principals and teachers' physical and mental health, wellbeing and safety is seriously at risk. There are increasing physical and psychosocial hazards associated with being a principal.

In a 2024 survey of the Australian principal class, 55% reported that they had been threatened with or subjected to physical violence, and that violent incidents had increased by 78% since 2011 (Dicke et al., 2025). Younger and less experienced principals are over-represented when it comes to risk of burnout and self-harm (See, 2022). Equally, Australian teachers' safety, health and wellbeing are declining (Longmuir et al., 2024).

Australian schools face a major principal recruitment and retention crisis. This is due to a range of factors. These include excessive workloads, unsafe working environments, the challenges of under-resourced education systems supporting increasingly complex student populations, and the emotional labour of nurturing more fragmented and polarised communities. The proportion of teachers and leaders who intend to leave before retirement increased from 2021 to 2022 and remained relatively high (39%) in 2023 (AITSL, 2025b). This is reflective of broader international trends. Retention of teachers matters because quality schooling systems require a pipeline of strong, capable and well supported teachers into the principalship. Public-school principals wrestle daily with issues associated with a severely underfunded system which lacks the resources to fully support educators to care for the most disadvantaged students in Australian society.

A crucial part of principals' work is emotional labour – managing their emotions and that of others (Hochschild, 1983, 2012). The intensified emotional labour demanded of principals must be seen as part of a broader issue of educators' (principal and teachers') health, safety and wellbeing. Emotional labour is typically unseen by others and unrecognised in state and national policy and role descriptions of the principalship (Wilkinson, 2021). Yet it is crucial work in times of increased social and political volatilities. It calls on less visible, but important leadership skills: trauma-informed leadership, community building and the emotional management capacities to connect across diverse demographics in holistic and socially just ways (Wilkinson et al., 2020).

However, these new dimensions of principals' work are largely invisible in education policies, principal role descriptions and workforce development. This is despite these skills and capacities being indispensable in fostering the kinds of necessary conditions for students, schools and their communities to thrive (Walsh et al., 2020). When principals feel supported in meaningful ways by education systems, communities and families, emotional labour is what sustains and nourishes them, such as when they see the positive outcomes of their emotional labour (e.g. when they support a child through a difficult period and the child goes on to succeed). As one principal remarked to our research team, "without emotions, it is just labour".

Principals' work historically has been stressful, involving a constant juggle of often-conflicting demands of multiple stakeholders. However, what is new is the intensified emotional management work required in the principals' role. Principals are navigating increasingly diverse and often volatile school settings and communities. These volatilities include: the increasing polarisation of communities exacerbated by social media, a widening division in Australia between the rich and poor, reflected in an intergenerational divide in wealth between the young and old, global tensions associated with more volatile international settings, and the climate crisis (Howie et al., 2021; Keddie et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2018; Zembylas, 2020).

Moreover, there has been no 'snapback' or return to 'normal' for Australian schools since the COVID 19 pandemic. Instead, a new 'normal' has emerged. It is characterised by the highest-ever recorded levels of burnout and cognitive stress amongst school leaders (Dicke et al., 2025; Victorian Auditor General Office [VAGO], 2023); record levels of mental health issues for children and youth (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025; Brennan et al., 2021), rising levels of student absenteeism, school disengagement and violence¹ (Dep. of Ed., Australia, 2023), and excessive workloads². These combined factors negatively impact the attractiveness and retention of educators in the profession.

In addition, "administrative tasks, compliance obligations and government initiatives are disproportionately contributing to principals' workloads" with excessive workloads identified as the most significant cause of poor principal health and wellbeing (VAGO, 2023)³.

These factors, along with increased market competition, have intensified relational tensions within and between schools and school systems. Our study investigates the dire impact of these factors on principals' occupational health, safety and wellbeing.

It reveals that when systems ignore or minimise the consequences of these trends, it has severe impacts on the attraction and retention of quality teachers into the principalship.

Through critical incident testimonies, interviews with key education stakeholders, case studies of principals' emotional labour and a policy audit of principal role descriptions, our large-scale qualitative research provides in depth examples of principal's emotional labour in practice. The data provide a rich understanding of the emotional impact that leading in volatile times is having on principals' work. It highlights the specific material, economic, social, political and cultural conditions that sustain principals in their role, or that undercut them and may lead to their departure from the workforce.

FOOTNOTES

¹ From 2022 to 2023, the largest increase cited by educators intending to leave the profession was student behaviour (+9 percentage points) and parent behaviour (+5 percentage points). Between 2019 and 2023, there was a large percentual increase in student behaviour as a reason to leave the profession (rising from 30 to 42%) (Australian Teacher Workforce Data, 2025).

² Analysis of 2021 Census data report the following:

Female classroom teachers worked longer hours than males at all ages ... School teachers worked extraordinarily long hours compared with workers in comparable occupations. They worked particularly longer hours than individuals with school teaching qualifications working full-time in other occupations. Similarly, full-time school teachers with highest qualifications in selected fields of study worked much longer hours than individuals in other occupations with highest qualifications in the same fields of study ... The incomes of public sector classroom teachers were on average lower than their counterparts in the private sector, especially in the peak career age range 45 to 49 (Preston, 2023, p. 2).

³ On average principals work 55 hours per week (Victorian Auditor-General Office, 2023). During school holidays, "weekly working hours remained higher than the standard full-time load of 38 hours, with ... half of senior leaders working between 45 and 58 hours per week across the year" (Australian Teacher Workforce Data, 2025). Analysis of 2021 Census data reports that, "Principals worked much longer hours than classroom teachers, though more than half of all full-time classroom teachers aged from their mid-40s to 60s averaged 45 hours or more a week" (Preston, 2023, p. 2).

By recognising and understanding the emotional labour of principals, we can begin to advocate for the necessary support, training and changes to legislation that our reports highlight. The advocacy we seek for Australian principals working in public schools highlights the importance of government school education for equity and social justice. In turn, the reports foreground the strong and relentless commitment and expertise of Australian principals.

The project focuses on the work of Australian public-school principals. Principals in public schools must lead and manage concentrations of increasingly complex student populations and their communities. They do so under major funding constraints. Since 2009, government funding increases have favoured Catholic and Independent school over government schools (Cobbold, 2024). This has led to severe underfunding of public education systems across Australia, with only the Australian Capital Territory [ACT] meeting the School Resource Standard [SRS] for students (Department of Education 2023). This matters because Australian public schools enrol most students from the lowest SEA quartile – the most disadvantaged students in our society (Cobbold, 2025). Just over 80% of low SEA students attend public schools compared to 11.8% in Catholic schools and 7.7% in independent schools (Cobbold, 2025, p.7).

While all state and territory governments have agreed to lift funding to the SRS within a decade, inequitable funding regimes have grown worse over time. Australia is ranked as having one of the most inequitable systems of education in the OECD, ranked in the bottom third of schooling systems (Australian Education Union, 2024). These inequities give the emotional labour of public-school principals a distinctive 'edge' associated with high levels of stress and complexity⁴.

Such adverse conditions are amplified by negative media and political discourses about public education, which position some public schools as 'failing'. Consequently, this project features explicit activist and public advocacy work for public education as a public good that needs to be nurtured, valued and invested in.

Inviting Australian public-school principals to speak out about their experiences is an act of solidarity and support for their commitment to Australian students, families and communities. Listening to their testimonies, closely observing their work, and conferring with stakeholder groups provides a robust evidence base of the emotional investment of principals into their role that goes well beyond their job description. Whilst system support for principals in some states has been well-intentioned and signals some progress, major areas require urgent addressing.

We highlight these in Reports Two, Three and Four. This report is the second in this series that provides new knowledge about the emotional labour of the Australian public-school principal workforce and how it can best be supported for principals, educators, students, families and school communities to thrive.

FOOTNOTE

⁴ Analysis of the 2021 Census provides data on the age profiles of teachers in the private and public sectors shows a

much larger percentage of public school teachers in the younger age ranges. This indicates that the public sector has a disproportionate responsibility for the employment of graduates and their induction into the profession. This is costly for the public sector and allows the private sector to select successful early career teachers without putting resources into their initial development. Resourcing for schools should take this into account. This finding corroborates the position of leading education administrator and policy advisor, Gregor Ramey, more than two decades ago. He argued that the public sector should be recompensed for its disproportionate share of the costly induction and development of early career teachers (Preston, 2023, p. 4).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

Our research study examines the following questions:

1. How is emotional labour currently understood and experienced by Australian public-school principals?
2. What broad and specific contextual and personal factors are significant in such understandings and experiences?
3. What theoretical and practical tools can help to better understand, prepare and support principals and systems to navigate the increasingly complex and demanding emotional labour that characterises leaders' work?

Our study has three overarching key objectives:

1. Develop a theoretically rigorous conceptualisation of public-school principals' work that addresses the intensified emotional demands of the role in times of heightened social divisions;
2. Generate a robust evidence base to inform scholarship, education policy and workforce development reforms to enable educational systems and principals to recognise and productively manage these new and intensified forms of labour; and
3. Develop theoretical and practical tools to better understand, prepare and support principals and systems to manage the increasingly complex emotional demands that characterise principals' work.

ABOUT THESE REPORTS

This report (Report Two) is the second in a series of our reports that examines key themes arising from an ARC funded (DP230100594) project, *Invisible Labour: Principals' Emotional Labour in Volatile Times*. Report One provides a technical overview of the study including literature review and methodology. Report Two is the first in a series of thematic reports that draws predominantly on findings from a survey of public-school principals' critical incidents to examine how emotional labour impacts principals. Report Three examines how violence and other social volatilities in relation to gender in schools impact the emotional labour of principals. Report Four examines the impact of education systems on principals' emotional labour. The reports focus on the principals' emotional labour in relation to these intersecting domains. They cover the following themes:

Report Two: The Impact of Emotional Labour on the Individual Principal

1. Wearing a professional mask
2. The diverse geographies of emotional labour
3. The bodily impacts of emotional labour.

Report Three: Schools and Emotional Labour

4. The escalation of violence in schools and its repercussions for principals' emotional labour
5. Social volatilities and gender
6. Emotional labour as a collective act of solidarity

Report Four: Emotional Labour, Schooling and Education Systems

7. Emotional labour and principals feeling "hung out to dry"
8. Who would want to be a principal?

Note that these themes overlap and intersect, with threads running throughout the themes, such as wearing a professional mask and the exploitation of principals' care.

Reports Two, Three and Four are based on extensive analysis of principal critical incident testimonies, drawn from a survey of Australian public-school principals conducted from 2023-2024. These findings are corroborated by close analysis of stakeholder interviews, an extensive literature review, case studies and policy audit (see detailed explanation in Report One). The recommendations at the conclusion of Reports Two, Three and Four are drawn from these research findings⁵.

The attraction and retention of high-quality educators into the principalship and lower turnover accrues significant social benefits: positively impacting teacher retention, school-community engagement and students' outcomes, particularly those from more marginalised backgrounds (Bartanen et al., 2019; Kelchtermans, 2017). The project supports governments to foster healthy and resilient Australian communities by reducing the significant social costs associated with high principal turnover, stress and burnout⁶. This is a crucial benefit given Australia's significant economic investment in its public-school systems. By adopting an activist approach in its methodology, through the publication of critical incident testimonies that foreground principals' voices, our research aims to raise public consciousness and engender dialogue about the hazardous occupational conditions of public-school principals.

CRITICAL INCIDENT TESTIMONIES

Between July 2023 and October 2024, public-school principals across Australia were invited to contribute a short anonymous testimony (in written and audio forms) in response to the following open-ended questions:

1. Describe a critical incident that has occurred in your role as a principal. What was your professional response?
2. How did the incident make you feel? What do you wish people understood about the incident and what you went through? What did you learn from this experience?
3. Is there anything else you wish to add?

Principals were invited to participate by a range of means, for example, via principal association newsletters, teacher union newsletters and social media. Identifying characteristics in the testimonies such as name and location of the school have been removed. For further details of the survey including the demographics of participants, see Report One. A key aim of the critical incident testimonies was to provide the opportunity for principals to speak about the emotional management aspects of their work in their own words. The urgent need for change is a key message throughout the testimonies.

A selection of anonymised principal testimonies is on our project website. monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times Within this document, you can click on this Weblink Icon to access more testimonies and data.

FOOTNOTES

⁵ The wording of critical incident testimonies and stakeholder interviews sometimes has been slightly changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

⁶ When it comes to principal health and wellbeing, "all principals do significantly worse than the general population" (VAGO, 2023). Mental injury was consistently the highest cause of principals' workers compensation claims between 2015 and 2021. It made up almost half (48 per cent) of all claims. By comparison, mental injury makes up an average of 29 and 20 per cent of teachers' and non-teaching school staff claims, respectively (VAGO, 2023).

INTRODUCTION

“I loved the job of principal; I was a very good teacher who recognised the things that mattered in schools. I was the AEU [Australian Education Union] rep for years as a teacher and knew the agreement backwards. As a result, I was welcomed by the staff when I was appointed to my new school as principal.”

It was a very good school when I started, but in the years I was there it became the highest performing secondary school in [our areas]. All data measures improved over my tenure. Our student, staff and parent satisfaction survey and NAPLAN [National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy] data were all trending upward...”

(PRINCIPAL TESTIMONY, MALE, RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL).

02

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Emotional labour has been defined as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display [that is] sold for a wage” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). It was originally coined as a term to describe service industry work, where workers had to project a different emotion than the one they were experiencing, e.g., a flight attendant tasked

with maintaining an air of friendly calm, even amidst passenger complaints or turbulence (Hochschild, 1983). More recently, the concept of emotional labour has been extended to study the ‘caring’ industries of healthcare (Riley & Weiss, 2016) and education (Steen-Johnsen et al., 2024), as well as management (Bolton, 2009).

Our study documents how emotional labour is currently experienced by Australian public-school principals and how this labour differs from other ‘caring’ professions. Emotional labour in the principalship is a poorly researched and understood phenomenon (Maxwell & Riley, 2017). What is known is that the nature and characteristics of principals’ labour involves repeated, ongoing interactions with key stakeholders at varied developmental levels versus ‘one-off’ brief encounters typically experienced in other ‘caring’ professions such as health or social work (Maxwell & Riley, 2017).



The skills required to manage competing demands, and the emotional capacity to switch seamlessly between stakeholder interactions whilst simultaneously impression managing, can impact on health and wellbeing, e.g., chronic stress, feelings of burn out and lowered job satisfaction levels (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020). Moreover, this work is highly gendered, 'raced' and classed, with women viewed as skilled emotional managers (Blackmore, 1996) and over-represented in challenging, hard-to-staff public schools where disadvantaged students are predominantly located (MacDonald et al., 2021).

Understanding the emotional labour of principals matters because it provides key insights into the rapidly declining principal and teacher workplace health, safety and wellbeing that is negatively impacting their attraction and retention. We now turn to the individual experience of emotional labour on principals in Australian public schools.

THEME ONE: WEARING A PROFESSIONAL MASK

Principals are called upon daily to manage others' emotions, such as placating angry parents, easing ongoing staff tensions, persuading students in heightened states of emotions to self-regulate, and promoting their school's success. Simultaneously they must maintain an exterior of calm and professionalism, whilst managing the varied emotions that human encounters elicit. Maintaining emotional detachment is a necessary act of survival but can come at significant cost to one's emotional health and motivation (Hochschild, 2012).

Emotional labour entails both surface and/or deep acting. Surface acting is when we know we are acting but do so to maintain social order (e.g., the polite smile that masks our sense of frustration). Deep acting entails both outward and self-deception. It requires actively working to suppress proscribed or unwanted feelings to produce an idealised feeling that seems more appropriate to the situation (Hochschild 1979; 2012). In this theme, the principals' testimonies detail surface and deep acting as they worked to maintain ongoing relations with parents, teachers and children. However, these forms of acting can lead to increasing levels of alienation from oneself and one's work as the testimony below reveals:

"Others [staff] can vent and say how they really feel but I cannot. We leaders in special needs education experience vicarious trauma with no outlet and are almost held responsible or blamed for that happening, despite having processes in place. I know it is natural to blame but it's hard when we can't defend ourselves well. It's frustrating when people who were too close to a child therefore assaulted don't change their proximity despite support and reminders.

I learned to be open and clear to all staff about process, so when people complain, the process has been communicated. I am supportive and calm even when people are angry and venting, I try to detach emotionally and understand people need to vent and they trust me."

(FEMALE PRINCIPAL, REGIONAL SPECIALIST SCHOOL OR SPECIAL DEVELOPMENTAL SCHOOL).

Another testimony tells of the *"immense weight of loss and anger that this should happen at a workplace, but I had to internalise this to be the leader – the school leader – calm, supportive and caring"* **(Male principal, secondary, rural school).**

Echoing other testimonies, one principal observed, *"My professional response prioritised neutrality, confidentiality, and adherence to proper procedures"* **(Male principal, primary, capital city).**

A relationship has been established in research between "surface acting (or emotional dissonance)" and the emotional exhaustion that accompanies burnout (Wharton, 2009, p. 159). Educators who work with at-risk students are likely to be heavily invested in high-stakes outcomes. Such work requires potent emotional investment and exchanges through emotional displays of empathy, care and sensitivity (Oplatka, 2012). Female principals in Blackmore's (1996) study developed a set of strategies to cope with the emotional demands of their work.

These included reducing their familiarity with staff, depersonalisation of their identities, detachment and regulation (Blackmore, 1996). Reported defence strategies for mediating the inner conflict that emerged from emotional dissonance included disengaging or distancing from other colleagues (Blackmore, 1996). Blackmore (2010) argues that to remedy this, leadership training needs to begin with a critical examination of identities and representations, and how these are realised both discursively and through social interaction. Ignoring emotions when dealing with acute incidents can take its toll on principals.

The pressures of isolation in the role are connected to the internalisation of feelings. When principals experience unacceptable workplace behaviour, they are required to internalise their feelings about how they are treated, as these three critical incident testimonies illustrate:

“Responding to the staff/community trauma went on for years, throughout which I was expected to model calm and focus on school business.”

(FEMALE PRINCIPAL, PRIMARY SCHOOL, CAPITAL CITY).

“Initially, I was focused on my community and the boy’s family. I was not concerned about my own feelings.”

(MALE PRINCIPAL, SECONDARY SCHOOL, CAPITAL CITY).

“My school staff and the parents were very pleased with how I had handled the situation. This gave me some peace of mind in the early days. However, people don’t see the internal thinking around the whole situation that takes up a lot of energy.”

(MALE PRINCIPAL, RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL).

The emotional labour of coping is echoed in the following testimony that explains how far more than resilience is required:

“Working with emotional staff at the time, and working with leaders who were shattered, while I was trying to deal with my own emotions, was soul destroying. Good people cried, took time off, left the profession, left the school. People said that I ‘coped well’, but they didn’t know the emotional and physical toll the issue left for me. There was no one I could turn to.”

(Male principal, rural F-12/central school).

The testimony below is emblematic of what many principals observed about being able to unmask safely following a critical incident:

“I was completely overwhelmed and shocked to start. However, I did not have a lot of time to process or gain an understanding of my own feelings and emotions. I was privy to graphic details of the event and had to keep a front up for staff to ensure their emotional and mental wellbeing was taken care of. I wish people ASKED me how I felt.

My [State] Director checked in regularly, however people around me on the ground, didn’t ask how I felt. I think because everyone felt the topic was too hard to bring up. I felt I needed to remain stoic and ‘together’ in order to support our community through the ordeal. With the children being from the same cultural background as me –

trying to have [Justice] services understand cultural aspects was a fight...

I learned how to manage a community crisis, and to ensure all aspects were covered. I also learned that I needed to create space to talk, debrief and unload – because I didn’t and it heavily affected me.”

(Female principal, primary, capital city).

Many principals struggle to cope. Testimonies contain anecdotes of principals reaching for alternative solutions to stress including alcohol,

“My alcohol consumption in the week [of the incident] tripled, at least. I still didn’t sleep much. But everything still got done, so that others could do their jobs.”

(Female principal, specialist school, regional city).

We explore the bodily impact of emotional labour on individual principals in Theme Three of this report.

While professional masking is important and necessary, there needs to be support specifically tailored to the needs of principals and the issues that principals must deal with in their contexts. Targeted professional supervision is one way to better support principals as we outline in our recommendations at the end of this report.

THEME TWO: THE DIVERSE GEOGRAPHIES OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Zembylas (2024) writes that “very few studies report the significance of school type for teachers’ emotion management strategies and outcomes ... more research is needed to study the fit between emotion management strategies, teacher identity, and institutional educational settings” (p. 222). While there are many commonalities in the emotional labour that shape the work of public-school principals in our study, clear contextual differences emerge. This is unsurprising – the idea that context matters is a truism. However, there has been little research that documents *how and why place matters* when it comes to understanding the emotional labour of the principalship.

We explored several strands regarding differences in context. We examined what these varied contexts meant for principals' emotional management strategies, how it shaped their identity as principals, and what were the outcomes when it came to their work. The strands included: (a) the emotional labour of the principalship in regional, rural and remote schools; (b) the emotional labour of being an Indigenous principal in a colonial settler nation/leading Indigenous schools as a non-Indigenous principal; and (c) the emotional labour of leading in low socioeconomic status (SES) schools. We examine each of these strands below.

(A) The Emotional Labour of the Principalship in Regional, Rural and Remote Schools

Principals in regional, rural and remote contexts gain an enormous amount of satisfaction from their roles. They understand that they play a key role in towns and communities where the school is the hub of a district. In a time where government services increasingly have been stripped from rural and remote Australia (Evans et al., 2019), the school is often the one key institution left. Moreover, communities often take a great deal of pride in their school, and these sentiments often are reciprocated. As one retired regional principal observed as he recounted a critical incident:

"The school was a central part of the community and was very highly valued and respected. This valuing and respect was a two-way street – the school was very proud of the community that we served."

(Male principal, secondary school, regional city).

However, a recent survey of principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing reports that "rural and remote school leaders ... despite representing a small percentage of our participants show concerning results" (Dicke et al., 2025, p. 1). Principals in remote and very remote schools were sent a 'red flag' for high levels of anxiety and risk of self-harm. These were considerably higher than the average for all school leaders⁷ (Dicke et al., 2025, p. 52).

Analysis of our data shows a range of contributing factors to understanding the nature of principals' emotional labour in regional, rural and remote contexts.

These include:

1. The unique role of principals as authority figure and bridge builders (e.g., managing natural disasters; connecting community to services).
2. Access to resources (e.g., physical infrastructure; human resources such as teachers, specialist personnel and services to support students with complex needs); and
3. Isolation – geographically, professionally and personally – which is exacerbated for inexperienced principals.

A number of the testimonies from principals attested to their key role in managing not only their school but their community before, during and after natural disasters. This is an increasingly common phenomenon due to climate change. Research into disaster recovery after major bushfires has noted that schools and their leaders "play a key role in supporting their communities throughout bushfire preparation, planning, relief and recovery" (New South Wales Department of Education, 2020, p. 5).

Principals were at the helm of these disaster recovery efforts. This work included not only the day to day running of the school but also working with the community to prepare for and then contribute to the recovery. Typically, they were appointed members of emergency management teams – including preparation and disaster recovery – as well as being the emotional buffer and key informant for not only the school but the community. This role did not stop when the disaster ended; for the medium to long term, physical and emotional impacts on the community were enormous. The emotional cost was high, particularly when principals were dealing with their own homes being destroyed or family or friends being injured or killed. In a small community where most people know each other, the impact of loss of life and infrastructure is magnified.

As one stakeholder observed about a flooding disaster in their home state:

"talking about the emotional cost of the work of school leaders. To me, there can be no greater example of just what it was that those principals have put in ... Those principals were in emergency meetings with local council, with the SES, with police, would be working with their parent communities around trying to make plans for the future in a context of a community that has been absolutely devastated by floods ...

Many of those principals had themselves, had their houses destroyed, had lost motor

vehicles, pets, etcetera ... they're often derided as low SES, challenging communities, hard to staff. This was a community that poured love into that space ... but the management of that ... through the school leaders, the principal, was an enormously complex task, because ... a whole range of contingencies have to be taken into account."
(Stakeholder interview, Male leader of principals' organisation).

A key aspect of principals' emotional labour is their *brokerage role as bridge builders*. This includes connecting services to students, their families and often the surrounding community. This is no easy task as services are often limited, there are long waiting lists, or they are non-existent. In rural and remote communities where schools are often one of the few public services remaining, the demands on principals to play this brokerage role are particularly intense. We see it in the natural disaster example above and in other major crises, such as the COVID 19 pandemic. We also see it in the critical incidents that assail a small community, where most people know each other. These include the death of a beloved community member, suicides, murders and so forth. One principal's testimony recounted how she inherited a school and town in mourning as they came to terms with the suicide of a young student:

"The community was reeling ... Our students were angry ... Support was offered at the time for a couple of weeks after by what I like to call FIFO (fly in fly out) wellbeing workers ... I wanted to do something to get additional support (wellbeing) for school students and staff. There was nothing ... Finally, a Youth Engagement officer ... sent me a link to ... a whole of community approach to mental illness/mental health & had the potential to make a difference... I was able to work with those group of year 8's again and tell them that they were never forgotten."

FOOTNOTE

⁷ Other causes of stress for principals in remote and very remote schools are the demographic profile of staff and workloads. In remote and very remote schools, the teaching staff are "much more likely to be very young (aged under 30, especially under 28), and much less likely to be mid-career (aged 40 to 54) than teachers in any other locality type" (Preston, 2023, p. 2). This puts an extra load on remote school principals to induct and develop young and inexperienced teachers, for principals lack the support of an experienced group of mid-career teachers who typically would carry out this role. In relation to workloads, "teachers in remote and very remote regions tended to work the longest hours" (Preston, 2023, p. 2).

When asked how the incident made her feel, the principal responded:

"It was harrowing ... I reached out to [the Department of Education] and had no support. I felt hopeless – this is not an area that I'm equipped to deal with and was hopelessly out of my depth. All I could do was listen and try to comfort as best I could but watched in helplessness as the students continued their downward spiral ... I learned that no-one was going to rescue me, or my school or the community. That any efforts to solve problems or address issues must come from within."

(Female principal, rural secondary school).

A constant refrain in rural and remote principals' testimonies and stakeholder interviews was their school and community's lack of access to resources and services. This included physical infrastructure and human resources such as teachers, specialist personnel and services to support students with complex needs – often in school and communities experiencing high poverty. As we see from the critical incident account above, this lack of resources and services impacted principals in terms of the sheer quantity of hours it consumed, but also the emotional toll of dealing with the repercussions of this paucity of resources.

In our study, teacher shortages were also identified in the testimonies as a key factor impacting regional, rural and remote principals' emotional labour. Whilst one recent survey of principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing noted that teacher shortages had dropped to seventh as an ongoing stressor in 2024, teacher shortages in the same survey in remote and very remote schools were ranked as the third and fourth highest source of stress respectively (Dicke et al., 2025, p. 52). Our analysis of the testimonies and stakeholder interviews suggests it remains a major stressor for regional, rural and remote schools. As one stakeholder interviewee notes:

"We've got schools in a regional centre, which is down 17 teachers. That's not extra teachers; that's base allocation teachers ... I was at a forum the other day where they actually said, "We're hiring people now that we wouldn't have even considered hiring five years ago." And the impact of that on [principals] having to manage people, manage performance, behaviours."

(Female leader of principals' organisation).

As another stakeholder observed,

"A hard to staff school is a hard to lead school."

(Male leader of principals' organisation).

Other critical incident testimonies are available here: monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times

Feeling alone in one's role is a key characteristic of the principalship no matter where one is located. However, geographical isolation compounded by lack of access to peers or other supports gives the emotional labour of rural and remote principals a particular intensity. Moreover, rural and remote principals are often more inexperienced, that is, in the first years of the principalship. This combination leaves them more vulnerable to mental health issues (Dicke et al., 2025) and exacerbates principal turnover. As one 'early years' principal observed in a critical incident testimony,

"I guess it's the accumulation of these stories, it's not ONE issue that brings us to our knees ... It's such a lonely job, we are isolated and left on our own to fend for ourselves."

(Female principal, rural secondary school).

(B) The Emotional Labour of being an Indigenous Principal in a Colonial Settler Nation/Leading Indigenous Schools as a Non-Indigenous Principal

Schools in regional, rural and remote locations may have significant numbers of Indigenous students. These schools are often led by non-Indigenous principals who are inexperienced and/or with little or no knowledge or relationship with the community:

"One of the other [issues] that's not so readily acknowledged [by the department of education] are the white, middle-class, female more so but also male, teachers who go out into Indigenous communities. Who may not have seen or worked with Indigenous people ever, and that is very confronting. Meaning it can be very challenging ... You don't know where to start."

(Male leader of principals' organisation, non-indigenous).

A lack of training and support has knock-on effects, including challenges in recruiting suitable principals and teachers. For instance, one key stakeholder observed:

"They [state education department] used to have this really great program called Partners for Success, where they would do stuff so people understood what it was like to go into the Torres Strait or to go into an Aboriginal community. You've got some of those communities which are really difficult and very isolated. And it's not just easy getting in and out. So, they're a range of complexities – But I think this thing we're seeing at the moment is the teacher shortage and not being able to get people in there."

(Female leader of principals' organisation, non-indigenous).

This lack of training and understanding also extends in some testimonies to criticism of personnel in departmental head offices who were seen as removed from the 'action' and did not appear to understand the sensitivities and complexities of the communities.

For instance, one highly experienced non-Indigenous principal working in a remote, Indigenous community recounted how a major altercation between two Indigenous groups in their community meant that:

"Some staff were very worried but soldiered on for the children's sake. We managed well and all staff came to work every day. [Eventually] regional office got involved from afar and their comments and requests stressed staff out more than the incident. Left to manage by ourselves, with local knowledge and supporting each other we did much better than when off site management took an interest."

"My stressors as a principal did not come from the incident or my staff's requirement, but the unqualified input from office-based leadership above me ... If I had to sum it up, I'd say the biggest emotional drain on principals are corporate demands that don't take the local circumstances into account; help that is not the help requested, but the help that makes the department look good..."

"There is still (and growing worse) a disconnect between schools and corporate. Corporate [government] should support schools, but it's (again) about schools fulfilling corporate demands which are generally around compliance and (financial) accountability."

(Female principal, non-Indigenous, remote F-12/central school).

Racism remains a key issue, and the Referendum of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament had exacerbated racial tensions. As one stakeholder recounted:

"we found that ... kids who came up to school sites to vote ... saw all of the derogatory negative type of comments, related that to their school. And so, school suddenly became a place that wasn't so safe for kids and their families ... That was an impact that I don't think any of us had thought through beforehand."
(Female non-Indigenous principals' association leader).

For Indigenous school leaders, the emotional labour of the principalship can pose particular challenges. Whilst there are similarities between the emotional labour of Indigenous and non-Indigenous principals, there are key differences. For instance, there is an unheralded "cultural load" – or better yet, "colonial load" placed on Indigenous school leaders with "these educators often tak[ing] on extra roles beyond their job descriptions due to their unique cultural backgrounds and perspectives" (Australian Primary Principals Association [APPA] & the National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Principal Association [NATSIPA], 2025). This responsibility is "both a point of pride and a significant responsibility to carry" (APPA & NATSIPA, 2025). Research carried out by the Yalukit Yulendji Committee (the Australian Education Union [AEU] National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Committee) reported that Indigenous educators felt:

"burdened with the responsibility of addressing Indigenous issues in the workplace and educating their non-indigenous colleagues on Indigenous culture, despite all staff being provided with professional learning opportunities by their employers."
(AEU, 2023, as cited in APPA & NATSIPA, 2025).

This can lead to an "extra layer of emotional and mental pressure to their already demanding roles" (AEU, 2023, as cited in APPA & NATSIPA, 2025). Simultaneously, Indigenous principals must navigate the demands of a white, mainstream education system whilst "advocating for fair representation, inclusion in the curriculum, and visibility in research agendas", as well as dealing with persistent racism (AEU, 2023, as cited in APPA & NATSIPA, 2025).

If this workload is not recognised (as it generally is not), this:

"can take a toll on health and wellbeing"
(Female leader of a principals' organisation, non-Indigenous).

(C) The Emotional Labour of Leading Low SES Schools

Another crucial site where principals' emotional labour varies is in low socio-economic status (SES) schools. It is important to note that there are many overlaps between the issues faced by rural and remote principals, principals in Indigenous communities and low SES principals, as many of these schools (although not all) are low SES communities. Principals and stakeholder interviews drew attention to several factors that gave principals' work in low SES schools a particular intensity. This includes the growing segregation and stratification of public education in Australia which has been encouraged by a succession of state and federal government policies around parental choice of schools, and the marketisation of schools as part of neoliberal policies of education as a private rather than public good (Cobbold, 2025; Reid, 2019). Most importantly, these policies aligned with the over funding of private schools and the starvation of funds to public schools which overwhelmingly educate the most disadvantaged students in Australia (Cobbold, 2025). As one former principal and stakeholder observed:

"After decades of funding policies and denigration of the public education system ... we're now reaping those ... negative seeds ... We could be one of the few Western industrialised nations that have a minority public education system within one or two decades ... We actually could turn education into a purchasing commodity, which school fees are, effectively. Then, that really changes the whole board game of inequality."
(Male leader of principals' organisation).

Another stakeholder highlighted that:

"We've got these massive issues of segregation and stratification. And so basically the way that class ... is organised is ... really, really expensive private schools ... We've got a whole bunch of schools that are in spaces where there isn't a lot of family income, there are not a lot of family resources. And so when you overlay that with some of these other issues, like a pandemic or floods or whatever, it does become an extra level of work for those principals."
(Male leader of principals' organisation).

This lack of valuing of public schools had significant impacts on students. As one stakeholder interviewee observed:

"I just look into the eyes of some of our kids, they just don't even believe that they are worth more money because ... they're poor people. How's that? That's just crazy stuff ... that needs to change."
(Female leader of principals' organisation).

We argue that paying attention to the particularities of place matters for the attraction and retention of high-quality educators into the principalship. In turn, lower turnover accrues significant social benefits for schools and students from marginalised backgrounds: positively impacting teacher retention, school-community engagement and students' outcomes (Bartanen et al., 2019; Kelchtermans, 2017).

Finally, in this section we foregrounded the crucial difference that diverse geographies make to the emotional labour of public-school principals. The data points to a crucial aspect of principals' emotional labour in these settings – the additional emotional complexities of carrying out the role. As the preceding quotes illustrate, these complexities arise from principals' emotional investments in, and resistance against, broader practices and systems of injustice within and beyond education practice (Zembylas, 2010). For Indigenous principals, these extra complexities are also intensified by the "colonial load" (APPA & NATSIPA, 2025) they carry.

Building on the themes above, our next theme delves into the bodily impacts of emotional labour.

THEME THREE: THE BODILY IMPACTS OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Research on teachers' emotions introduces the concept of "emotional geographies" to explain how feelings in school environments arise through patterns of connection and separation (Hargreaves, 2001a, 2001b). These geographies refer to the spatial and experiential dimensions that shape how individuals relate to one another, influencing the emotions that people hold about themselves, others, and their broader context (Hargreaves, 2001a). Hargreaves highlights how emotional experiences are often shaped more by forms of separation than by closeness (2001b). He identifies five primary types of emotional distance that affect teachers—sociocultural, moral, professional, political, and physical (2001b). Our research into school leadership suggests two additional emotional dimensions—embodiment and gender to better understand the emotional landscape of the principalship (see Report Three and below).

Bodies form part of the unacknowledged emotional labour of the principalship, as the work principals do is deeply connected with their image, identity, muscular strength and dress (Heffernan & Thomson, 2020). A 2022 analysis of workers' compensation claims found that educators in Australia have claim rates 74% higher than average for assault-related injury and 33% higher for mental health (Education Daily, 2024). In the critical incident testimonies, principals report the impact of the principalship on their body. These include sleepless nights, fatigue, stress, tension, heart attacks, physical illness, being bruised in violent interactions, crying, and using their bodies as human shields during violent encounters.

In the following testimonies, the stress impacted principals' sleep. The emotions they expressed included self-doubt and worry:

"I had to have psychological counselling and had stopped reading [an aggrieved parent's] emails until I felt I could deal with the next email that she would send. I did not sleep... I sometimes doubted my competence in my position and after over 20 years of being a principal had contemplated leaving my job."
(Female principal, secondary, capital city).

"Dealing with this parent was incredibly stressful. I started to dread each email, I could feel my stress levels rise each time. I lost many hours of sleep trying to think of a resolution, I worried about the parent taking to social media, I worried about the impact on the other student involved."
(Male principal secondary school, capital city).

The impacts of stress and emotion due to trauma in the workplace were reported by principals as resulting in physical illness:

"So, in the middle of a pandemic and two critical incidents, we managed to get through. Well, almost... I was diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes and it is well-known that stress can bring this on."
(Male principal, primary, capital city).

Schools are physical, visceral, corporeal spaces where principals' bodies are integral to their role. In the following examples, bodies do unexpected things, pose problems, and/or dominate the narrative. Principals use their bodies in their role to solve these issues during critical incidents where bodies can lose control and duty of care is integral:

"[The parent] leaned forward and collapsed onto the carpet."
(Female principal, primary, capital city).

"Unconscious student after having head stomped on."
(Female principal secondary, capital city).

"A staff member had a heart attack... I moved into position to deliver mouth-to-mouth as the emergency services on the phone told us to count breaths and the defib told us to commence compressions... I waited for the first aid officer to tell me to administer breaths as my staff member gagged, groaned and spat."
(Female principal, secondary, regional city).

When a critical incident reaches a point of escalation, the principal's bodies may become human shields and form part of the safe spatial arrangements for students:

"[The male student] became aggressive in body language and vocalised his anger. Two senior executives, myself and a deputy, had to stand in between the two students, and protect the female student from the male student's advances and threats. This scene went on for a good 10 minutes. Eventually we separated them and had the male student in the deputy principal's office with a student support officer (social worker). He calmed down but refused to leave school... The female student was being kept in a secure location in the school."
(Male principal, secondary, regional city).

Principal testimonies revealed the invisible labour of the principal's role. They reported performing police, ambulance and funeral duties, alongside their role in managing multiple stakeholders:

"[After a death on the school site] I had to stand with the body waiting for emergency services to arrive. I wasn't allowed to cover it in case it was a crime scene. The emergency services were busy and intense communication was required to get them to the school. While all this was going on, I was keeping curious parents and students away from the area."
(Female principal, primary, capital city).

The principal is embodying this invisible labour, using their body as a 'human fence' to separate groups. The entanglement of their body, emotions and priorities is physically and emotionally taxing.

As we examine in Report Three, principals reported that the school site frequently was an unsafe workplace. They described it as a threatening space, expressing emotions that they ordinarily would mask, such as nervousness and anxiety, both on their own behalf, and that of their students:

"Nervous and anxious. Nervous because you worry about whether you have made the right decision or not. Anxious because you are never sure if/when they might arrive at school looking to attack you or someone else about something you know nothing about (at that time)."
(Male principal, primary, capital city).

Emotions and bodies are entangled in principals' work. Although testimonies reported on individual situations, the solutions cannot reside solely within the individual principal as our recommendations below attest.

03

RECOMMENDATIONS

We begin our recommendations with some general observations. First, we need to celebrate the ways principals make a difference in the lives of young people. The positive recognition of public-school principals requires government and public elevation. Historically, there have been antagonistic messages from some mainstream media, social media and politicians that have diminished the value of public education.

Second, governments through Australia have a collective responsibility to improve the social conditions for Australians, which in turn will support Australian school principals. Whilst we acknowledge the enormous pressures faced by many education systems, principals have a right to be safe at work. Principals face new and serious physical and psychosocial hazards that are impacting on their physical and mental

health and professional longevity. These hazards are already well understood by industrial relations research (Gray & Collie, 2018; Lane, et al., 2016); and should inform significant reform in all states and territories.

Third, public education deserves financial rewards that positively reflect the rewarding job of government school principals. Public schools in Australia educate two-thirds of the student population but overwhelmingly educate students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and with complex needs (Cobbold, 2025). The Australian schooling system ranks in the bottom third of OECD nations in providing equitable access to quality education (AEU, 2024). This has major implications for the quality of education we can provide for all our children and knock-on impacts for the health and wellbeing of educators.

Our data affirms the corpus of quantitative data that tells us that physical, traumatic, bodily experiences have become normalised in the principalship rather than being experienced as unusual (Dicke et al., 2025) (see also Report Three, Theme Four: Escalation of Violence). The principals' role needs to be re-conceptualised, to take into account their key role as 'first responders'.

As one principal states, *"I managed all of this, worried about the possible consequences without any ability to discuss prevention strategies etc with any of my staff."*

(Male principal testimony, K-10, capital city).

Policy making and education system responses to principal, health, safety and wellbeing needs to move beyond individualised, psychological responses to focus on larger scale interventions and responses. The alarming statistics on principal (and teacher) stress, burnout and mental and physical impacts cited at the beginning of this report are not an individual responsibility. Nor are they new. They are the long-term trends of a workforce in crisis due to unsafe, hazardous working conditions. They subsequently require a collective response. We therefore divide our recommendations into macro, meso and micro levels. The macro level encompasses the federal government and related agencies, such as AITSL and Safework Australia and the need for a national response, which includes the meso level targeted at state and territory levels. Micro levels encompass schools and their communities that are shaped by macro and meso levels of governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE (NATIONAL)

Macro Level:

1. Implement full funding of public schools across Australia to 100% of the SRS by the end of the current federal government term. The ten-year timeline for state governments to reach 100% SRS is ten years of student attrition, teacher and principal crisis and risks a terminal decline in public education that may not be able to be arrested. This funding needs to be put into frontline services in schools, not in out of school staffing focussed on compliance (c.f. Cobbold, 2025 Victoria). Funding of public education should also recognise the “disproportionate share” that it carries in relation to the “costly induction and development of early career teachers” from which the private sector benefits (Preston, 2023, p. 4).
2. Redress the inequality between government and non-government sectors. This extends from choice in student enrolment to the heightened accountabilities in which public-school principals are held more publicly accountable.
3. Convene a policy roundtable involving state, territory and federal system leaders, principal associations and principal union representatives to audit policies that define and describe principal work. As part of the roundtable, conduct a root and branch review that focuses on a significant reduction in principals' workload so that principals are able to focus primarily on their key role as leading the learning of their schools.
4. Review principal position descriptions to more accurately reflect the emotional labour of principals. Our principal data tells a different story than what is in current principal descriptions. Some position descriptions have remained largely unchanged in decades.
5. Add principals to The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan as a distinct category to recognise and respond to the distinctive nature of their role. Increasing the provision of specialist roles and customised services for schools, including behaviour support, disability, mental health and psychological services for students and staff is a necessary complementary action. Such support needs to be extended for rural, remote and highly disadvantaged schools which face particular challenges in these areas.
6. Encourage Australian federal, state and territory governments to work collectively with principal associations, teacher unions and Safe Work Australia (which develops national policy relating to workplace health and safety) to ensure appropriate Workplace Health and Safety controls for physical and psychosocial workplace harms are legislated and resourced in each state and territory.
7. Review and update AITSL's Professional Standard for Principals (Principal Standard) to better reflect the diverse leadership challenges principals face and the range of skills needed. The Principal Standard has not been updated since it was published in 2014. A revised Principal Standard would make visible and valued the emotional demands of the role and bring it in line with current practice, helping to inform system level leadership frameworks, performance measures and professional development planning. For example, significant climate, health, social and economic emergencies have unfolded in Australia in the past decade. The critical leadership work undertaken by principals over this time (and described by principals in our research) is not reflected in the current AITSL Professional Standard and, in the eyes of many principals, not valued by education systems. Growing educational and economic inequalities render urgent the development of context-specific leadership approaches to replace the current, centralised standards approach.
8. Research the costs of principal and teacher attrition in public schools and in particular, ‘hard to staff’ schools that are typically in highly disadvantaged communities. Research could also model the economic effectiveness of early intervention programs and reductions in principal (and educators' more generally) compliance tasks which have added considerably to excessive workloads to build an economic case for these interventions.
9. Compile proactive examples of good practice in supporting the principalship without reducing these examples to a one-size fits all, “what works” formula.

RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE (STATE)

State and territory governments, in collaboration with the federal government:

Meso Level:

1. Review position descriptions to more accurately reflect the emotional labour of principals. Our principal data tells a different story than what is in current principal descriptions. Some position descriptions have remained largely unchanged in decades.
2. Recognise principals as first responders. The volume of testimonies that report violence in schools towards principals and teachers makes it clear that principals are experiencing unsafe working conditions because of enduring major physical and psychosocial injuries at work. Government departments need to recognise the role of principal as 'first responder' in critical incidents and examine initiatives from other first line responder jobs that may support principals before, during and after such incidents. This includes, at the bare minimum, consistent and proactive 'check ins' after the incident rather than principals feeling isolated and responsible for seeking support. Learn from other first responder jobs where these practices are in place – policing, paramedicine, health care, social work. Consult with principal associations and teacher unions about which practices might be best suited for schools and principals.
3. Ensure that all principals receive education and training (e.g., during Initial Teacher Education, in principal preparation programs and principal induction) in managing critical incidents, such as natural disasters, in their communities. Schools and their leaders typically form a major hub in crisis responses (particularly in regional and remote communities).
4. Amend State and Territory principal role descriptions to incorporate a government accountability structure for principal wellbeing. As government employees, employing governments need to be held accountable for the wellbeing of their staff in the workplace. Principal and principal stakeholder groups have described numerous hazards and associated injuries in detail.
5. Take responsibility for the induction, support and mentoring of principals specifically in human resourcing, governance, occupational health and safety, and resourcing and maintenance. Additional mentoring and support during critical incidents should be accessible. This needs to be tailored to recognise the diverse geographies that place extra emotional loads on principals, e.g., working in specialist schools, rural/remote/regional, low SES schools, schools with significant Indigenous populations, principals of small rural schools.
6. Reduce the volume of principals' work during critical incidents by decreasing lengthy bureaucracy and procedures.
7. Diversify the principal workforce. For example, recruit principals from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and offer specialised, tailored support that recognises the "cultural load" of many Indigenous principals. Organisations such as National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals Association (NATSIPA) provide invaluable expertise and experience in this area. Train principals in programs that support principals' knowledge and understanding of working successfully with Indigenous communities. More broadly, support the principal workforce in more mainstream schools to work in ways that more fully respect Australia's Indigenous peoples towards reconciling the oppressions of our colonial past. See, for example, Queensland's discontinued program *Partners for Success* which was identified by a stakeholder, as where "*people understood what it was like to go into the Torres Strait or to go into an Aboriginal community*" (**Female leader of principals' organisation, non-Indigenous**).
8. Reconsider the equity of the staffing model for small schools and the added social complexity in large schools, particularly in low SES areas, to support principals during and after critical incidents.
9. Ensure that all principals receive education and training (e.g., during Initial Teacher Education, principal development programs, principal induction) in regard to all aspects of safety in schools for historically excluded groups: Indigenous, girls and women, people of diverse sexualities, those with disabilities, those living in poverty. This should not only focus on students but also staff from these groups. This should be a key component of principal development programs and safety training and be designed and/or led by key stakeholders in this area such as National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals Association (NATSIPA) and The Human Rights Commission.
10. Provide funding and personnel to support principals and schools to build strong school/community/caregiver partnerships – particularly crucial in highly disadvantaged communities which suffer disproportionately from high principal turnover. See successful models of such programs from the Australian Council of State School Organisations.⁸
11. Implement flexible working arrangements as an important option for carrying out the principals' role. This may help to increase the overall attraction of the role, attract more diverse groups into the principalship and reduce the isolation of the role. See the Victorian Department of Education's pilot program in this area along with research that has documented successful principal job-sharing arrangements (c.f., Muffs & Schmitz, 1999; Thomson & Blackmore, 2006).

FOOTNOTE

⁸  <https://www.acsso.org.au>

RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE (SCHOOLING)

Micro Level:

1. Reconceptualise the principals' role to take into account their role as 'first responders'. Provide timely and close medical and mental health support when required as well as adequate leave time. This "recovery time" should have built-in flexibility for the principal to choose when it is most appropriate to take this leave, e.g., potentially three-six months afterwards.
2. Establish and fund formal support networks for principals with other principal colleagues across systems of public schools, particularly in rural and remote areas and in schools with high levels of social disadvantage.
3. Increase capacity for principals to access professional supervision at all times and not just during critical incidents. For instance, the Victorian Department of Education's pilot program of group clinical supervision of principals holds promising possibilities.
4. Provide greater support to small rural schools by rethinking regional governance. As one stakeholder articulates:

"There needs to be a layer of support that sits between really small schools and the region and the work that the region does. Because regions are now accountability managers ... The senior improvement education leaders ... the majority of their role is to check in with principals, 'Have you done this, have you done that?', or if there's an issue, if there's a complaint follow up on the complaint, 'Tell me about it, what did you do, what didn't you do, can you ring the parent and apologise?', that sort of stuff. That is not ... educational support in terms of improving outcomes and student achievements."

(Female leader of principals' organisation).

Conclusion

Principals are proud of what they do. They express positive emotions in their critical incident testimonies, such as pride in working with integrity in leading the self and others. At the same time, because of policy architectures that work against them, many principals express emotions of employer abandonment, with the phrase that they are being “hung out to dry”. This is a recurring theme throughout the findings and will be explored in more detail in Report Four.

Some principals see challenges tied to the level of schooling, “Government primary schools ... do the bulk of the heavy lifting with the least available resources. We openly say there is a government primary school in every corner of WA [Western Australia], unlike secondary schools, unlike Catholic and independent schools” (Male leader of principals’ organisation).

Understanding how specific contexts impact the emotional labour of principals means rejecting a one size fits all formula for the training and support of principals. It means ensuring that more specifically tailored ongoing supports and services can be put in place to attract and retain high quality principals to these schools. This matters because schools and communities with high levels of social disadvantage are most adversely impacted by high principal turnover.

Wider social conditions are important. Our next reports identify themes emerging in the emotional labour of public-school principals and the exploitation of their care, examining systemic, social and collective dimensions of principals’ invisible emotional labour.

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