



Sustaining Leadership: Serving Schools and Students

A literature review research study for the South Australian State School
Leaders Association (SASSLA)

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School leadership
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ATWD	Australian Teacher Workforce Data
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease of 2019
DR	Documents' Review
ItD	Increase to date
NA	Not Available
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
QLD	Queensland
SASSLA	South Australian State School Leaders Association
SA	South Australia
TAS	Tasmania
VIC	Victoria
WA	Western Australia

Research study summary

Public school principals are experiencing excessive and unrelenting workload, increased accountability, and extensive responsibility demands, like never before. These overarching demands upon public school principals permeate throughout this entire literature review research study. The exponential growth of these demands within the last 10 years, and the increasing bureaucratic expectations and requirements, are negatively impacting school principal health and wellbeing, leadership productivity, and eroding the sustainability of the public school principal role. Additionally, the shortage of teachers and school leaders, the increased complexities in supporting teacher and student wellbeing, and a lack of clarity about the role of principal is exacerbating the challenges that school principals face.

Substantial changes are needed to reduce these overarching demands placed upon public school principals. This literature review research study explores these challenges and examines the associated outcomes, bringing into focus recommendations for immediate consideration and future action.

Key findings

1. *Increased accountability* is driving public school principal decision-making; significantly contributing to a lack of time for principals to build and sustain a positive school community culture.
2. *Extensive responsibilities* are overloading and overwhelming public school principals, with substantial energy directed towards data collection, management, and record keeping.
3. *Excessive and unrelenting workloads* are leading to principal burnout, stress, fatigue, depression, a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, and decreased autonomy.

Recommendations

1. Use existing literature, inclusive of reports and research studies, to facilitate professional discussions on how the public school principal role can change to better respond to competing professional demands.
2. Use existing literature, inclusive of reports and research studies, to plan, position, and implement supportive and innovative policy to establish priorities that better support public school principals.
3. Equating cost with excessive and unrelenting public school principal workloads will provide a scaffold for the prioritisation of actions.
4. Active engagement with professional associations, unions, and state/federal governments. A *collective voice* will be required to put in place solutions to the problem of increased and unsustainable professional demands upon public school principals.
5. Federal and state governments to review public school principal administration demands.
6. Government to introduce leadership support mechanisms; implementing additional leadership roles to support public school principals with the competing professional demands.
7. Government to provide greater autonomy to public school principals. Such action will better position public school principals to make and implement informed decisions that best serve their school community.

Research study aim

This research investigates the challenges faced by South Australian public school principals through a nationally scoped literature review research study. Particular focus is drawn upon the demands placed upon public school principals and the sustainability of the leadership profession, as a whole; with the aim of contributing to professional and public discourse.

Research study purpose

The research purpose is comprised of three parts:

1. To investigate challenges faced by South Australian public school principals within the current national educational context.
2. Investigate whether the role of public school principal is genuinely sustainable within the current educational national educational context.
3. To bring into focus recommendations for immediate consideration and future action.

Guiding research questions

The research questions guided the direction of this literature review research study and also contributed to the delineation of the research study scope. The research questions directly link to the three-fold purpose of this research:

1. What challenges are faced by South Australian public school principals within the current national educational context?
2. Is the public school principal role genuinely sustainable within current national educational contexts?

Definition of key terminologies

Defining terminologies enables increased clarity for the reader. However, meanings of terminologies can change; dependent on conceptual frameworks, the type of research being undertaken, and the context. As such, it is vitally important that key terminologies are operationally defined in order to clarify how the language is used in this research study. Therefore, the following key terminologies are defined as follows:

1. Educational context: The national educational landscape beholden to increasing administrative expectations, requirements, and demands.
2. Mixed-methods qualitative driven exploratory sequential design: The qualitative data collection and analysis is followed by the collection of quantitative data to test or generalise the initial qualitative results.
3. Qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis: Text deconstruction, through the questioning and testing of language meaning. A ten-step analytical approach, utilising descriptive text analysis, interpretive processing analysis, and explanatory social analysis.
4. Quantitative Documents' Review: An analytical point of integration, where the results of the qualitative stage one component become quantitative, connecting the analysis of one set of data to the collection of a second set of data.
5. Challenges: Obstacles that need to be overcome in order to achieve goals.
6. Literature: All documentation referred to and analysed in this research study. Australian-focused national and state/territory documents, referring in part or full, about the school principal role (2013-2023); available online; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) documents, inclusive or solely focused, on the school principal role (2013-2023); available online;

Department for Education and Department of Education documents that are inclusive, or solely focused, on the school principal role (2013-2023); available online, and Australian-focused peer-reviewed academic journal articles focused on the school principal role (2013-2023); available online.

Introduction

This literature review research study, commissioned by the South Australian State School Leaders Association (SASSLA), investigates the role of school principal in public education; within a national educational landscape beholden to increasing administrative expectations, requirements, and demands. Such an undertaking provides cognisance into the impact of increased administrative demands upon public school principals' health and wellbeing, as well as school leadership productivity.

Literature and research data was collected and analysed between April to September 2023, using a *mixed-methods exploratory sequential design* that was qualitative driven, utilising *Critical Discourse Analysis*, followed by a quantitative *Documents' Review* process, analysing supplementary quantitative data across the existing primary documents. A mixed-methods approach was deemed appropriate to address the aim, the research problem, three-fold purpose, and research questions because it has the capacity to provide understandings about issues and processes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021; Guest, 2013).

Overview of the challenges

In Australia, there has been a multitude of reports and studies focusing on the efficacy of teaching and initial teacher education. Furthermore, research directed towards school leadership in Australian public schools has also increased; particularly in reference to the increasing professional demands within the last decade (Arnold,

Rahimi, & Riley, 2023; Gorrell & De Nobile, 2023; See, Kidson, Dicke, & Marsh, 2023; Windle, Morrison, Sellar, Squires, Kennedy, & Murray, 2022).

Therefore, the scope of this research study examines relevant literature between 2013-2023; a period of time that has seen a dramatic increase in the complexities and professional demands associated with the Australian public school principal role (Gorrell & De Nobile, 2023), further exacerbated in recent years due to teacher shortages and student and teacher health wellbeing issues, increased since COVID-19 (See, Kidson, Dicke, & Marsh, 2023).

The problem of increased professional demands upon public school principals will be addressed in this literature review research study, with particular reference to public school principals in South Australia.

Methodology

The three-fold research purpose and the identified overarching problem provided the foundational principle of the research methodology; a *mixed-methods exploratory sequential design* that is qualitative driven, utilising *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*, followed by a *quantitative Documents' Review (DR)* process, analysing supplementary quantitative data across the existing primary documents.

The qualitative *CDA* focuses on the processes of meaning-making through the examination of language and language use, while the quantitative *DR* connects numeric data across the existing primary documents to create a second set of data; deemed suitable in addressing the research questions due to its capacities to draw out themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021; Guest, 2013; Morse & Niehaus, 2009) and provide understandings about issues and processes.

Inclusions for review are:

- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) documents, inclusive or solely focused, on the school principal role (2013-2023); available online.
- State and territory Department for Education and Department of Education documents that are inclusive, or solely focused, on the public school principal role (2013-2023); available online.
- Australian-focused peer-reviewed academic journal articles with a focus on the school principal role (2013-2023); readily available online.

Specific source information about the online literature inclusions for this review research study are listed (Appendix A).

Additionally, within the scope of this literature review research study there are exclusions, a methodological limitation, and intended de-limitations:

- Exclusions: Only the title, abstract, keywords, and summaries are available, online; literature is without a full-text; literature is not related to the inclusions for review and/or not strongly related, only touching upon the focus of the research study.
- A methodological limitation: Due to a literature review research study focus, observations, interviews, survey instruments, and media reports were not included. Decisions were made in order to focus on the information that is readily available to the public, only. An important aspect to acknowledge here is that this methodological limitation required careful attentiveness in ensuring that the epistemology connected with *critical theory* was maintained, throughout the research study.

- Intended de-limitations: Literature not referring to public school principal leadership is not included; literature dates are limited to 2013-2023, inclusively, and literature is available to the general public, online. These intended de-limitations with justifications are listed (Appendix B).

Additionally, the research questions connect to *critical theory*; a paradigm that challenges temporal, group, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and public communication contexts. It is through this lens that the literature is systemically reviewed and analysed.

Qualitative *Critical Discourse Analysis*

The research study process called upon Schneider's (2013) ten-step *CDA* systematic approach (Table 1), utilising descriptive text analysis, interpretive processing analysis, and explanatory social analysis (Janks, 1997; 2006). Text deconstruction, through the questioning and testing of language meaning, enabled language to be critiqued in such a way that challenged generally perceived common-sense approaches (Janks, 2006; MacLure, 2003; Mogashoa, 2014; Schneider, 2013). The ten-steps are:

CDA ten-step systematic approach	
1.	Context establishment
2.	Production process investigation
3.	Material preparation for analysis
4.	Coding of data
5.	Examination of the source(s) structure
6.	Collection and examination of discursive statements
7.	Cultural reference identification
8.	The identification of linguistic and rhetorical tools
9.	The interpretation of the data
10.	The presentation of the findings

Table 1: *CDA* ten-step systematic approach.

By deconstructing the texts through the testing and questioning of the generally accepted meaning of the language, the ten-step systematic analysis approach provided the platform for building an argument, from specific information to informed logical reasoning; through to the discovery of significant challenges, associated key challenges and connections amongst the data.

Quantitative *Documents' Review*

The first qualitative analytical stage, utilising *CDA*, was followed by the systematic quantitative *DR* analytical stage, underpinned by an adaptation of Pickering's (2017) quantitative research approach due to the initial research steps already undertaken in the qualitative research approach. It is here that analysed quantitative data, found in the qualitative literature, was used to connect previous analysis to the establishment of a second data set; creating an analytical point of integration, strengthening the research by providing supplementary research data. The adapted quantitative eight-step approach is listed, below (Table 2).

<i>DR</i> eight-step systematic approach	
1.	Search databases
2.	Read and scrutinise the literature
3.	Structure the database
4.	Enter the first 10% of data
5.	Test/revise categories
6.	Enter remaining data and then test/revise categories
7.	Create and review summary tables and then test/revise categories
8.	Evaluate key results and outcomes

Table 2: *DR* eight-step systematic approach.

The qualitative data analysis

Themes that arose from the ten-step qualitative data analysis reinforced identified concerns in the literature pertaining to the challenges public school principals face. The identified key themes arising from *CDA* were: *excessive and unrelenting workload, increased accountability, and extensive responsibilities*, with substantial energy directed towards *data collection, management, and record keeping*; evident across the literature review research study, but increasingly so in South Australia.

These key themes directly connected to the research study's aim, three-fold purpose, and overarching research problem; leading to the confirmation of *the* prevailing key issues and the understanding that the context imbued the issues (Lloyd, 2013).

As a result a conceptual diagram was created (Appendix C), providing the identification of significant challenges, associated key challenges and connections, and in conjunction with quantitative supplementary data, led to specific findings and recommendations. The quantitative data analysis and tabled results will now be discussed.

The quantitative data analysis

Quantitative data made connections to previous qualitative analysis, establishing a second set of data. As a result, an analytical point of integration was created, providing supplementary research data and further clarity about the imbued issues.

Australian state and territory public school principal workforce data that was available between 2013-2023, inclusive of assistant principal and liaison principal data in Victoria and assistant principal data in Tasmania, identified total public school principal number variations for state and territories, annually. Additionally, it needs to be noted that most public school principal workforce annual data for the Northern Territory (with

the exception of 2023) and all public school principal workforce annual data for Queensland was not publicly available (Appendix D).

Additionally *key sources of impact upon school leadership*, nationally, (Appendix E) in addition to the below percentile survey samples from Riley (2019); Riley & See (2020); Riley, See, Marsh, & Dicke (2021); See, Marsh, & Dicke (2022), and See, Kidson, Dicke, & Marsh (2023), inclusive of sample sizes from South Australia (SA) (Table 3), collectively support the findings.

School leadership survey responses	
2011-2018 in Data 2018 Published 2019.	Public school principal responses represented 70.3%, with 8.9% of the sample from SA.
Data 2019 Published 2020.	School leadership response equated to 81.1%, with 7.0% of the sample from SA.
Data 2020 Published 2021.	School leadership responses equated to 87.9%, with 7.0% of the sample from SA.
Data 2021 Published 2022.	School leadership responses equated to 86.6%, with 5.8% of the sample from SA.
Data 2022 Published 2023.	Public school leadership responses represented 64.6% of the data, with 7.1% of the sample from SA.

Table 3: School leadership survey responses.

The findings are substantiated from the results; successfully addressing the research problem, three-fold purpose of the analysis, and the research questions. The findings will now be discussed.

Findings

Through the *CDA* and *DR* processes, analysis moved beyond the organisation of data, leading to understandings about the information. Evidence arose from the information to emphasise the importance of key issues and findings.

The qualitative analysis led to three *significant challenges, associated key challenges and connections*; represented on the conceptual diagram (Appendix C): *increased accountability, extensive responsibilities, and excessive and unrelenting workload*. Significant challenges, overwhelmingly represented in the literature, above-and-beyond other represented challenges in the diagram, directly connected to each key challenge and are illustrated in a-like colour (lighter for ease of identification). Furthermore, the *significant challenges, associated key challenges and connections* led to the finding that there is a lack of clarity about the public school principal role, due to the growing professional demands.

Additionally, the supplementary quantitative analysis supported and strengthened the *CDA* findings. The *key challenges of impact upon school leadership* data (Appendix E) provides information that aligns with the *significant challenges, associated key challenges and connections* conceptual diagram.

However, it is worth noting that the data highlights the significant growth in school leadership challenges with *teacher shortages* and *student and staff health wellbeing*; areas of focus that have in recent years provided increased challenges for principals.

Despite the importance of these challenges, *teacher shortages* and *student and staff health wellbeing* only have a singular connection *on the significant challenges, associated key challenges and connections* conceptual diagram (Appendix C). The reasons for this are two-fold. Firstly, these challenges have dramatically increased in recent years and are not represented as challenges across the ten-year scope, strongly. Secondly, connections have not been fully ascertained due to the recent

time-frame, stemming from the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the *public school principal numbers 2013-2023* data (Appendix D) supports and strengthens findings. School leadership numbers have not dramatically increased, with the exception of two Australian states, despite increased professional demands. The available data informs the reader:

- Australian Capital Territory (ACT), a leadership increase of 52.
- New South Wales (NSW), a leadership increase of 192.
- South Australia (SA), a leadership decrease of 7.
- Tasmania (TAS), a leadership increase of 45.
- Victoria (VIC), a leadership increase of 552.
- Western Australia (WA), a leadership increase of 43.

However, the data does show that VIC has provided a substantial increase in principal positions; expanding upon the traditional school principal role, to include assistant principals and liaison principals. Additionally, NSW provides a sound increase in leadership roles; the establishment of new schools and the population size of the state are contributing factors for this increase. Yet importantly, in contrast, SA has seen a reduction in school leadership roles, despite the exponential increase in professional demands.

Inclusive of the aforementioned, three specific findings arose from the qualitative data; supported by the supplementary quantitative data:

1. *Increased accountability* is driving public school principal decision-making; significantly contributing to a lack of time for principals to build and sustain a positive school community culture; particularly evident in SA.

2. *Extensive responsibilities* are overloading and overwhelming public school principals, with substantial energy directed towards data collection, management, and record keeping; particularly evident in SA.
3. *Excessive and unrelenting workloads* are leading to principal burnout, stress, fatigue, depression, a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, and decreased autonomy.

Through the identification and confirmation of substantial and associated key challenges and connections, the results were collated; leading to an overarching central finding. Within the current national educational context, the public school principal role is not sustainable; particularly in SA where principal numbers are declining but *increased accountability, extensive responsibilities* and *excessive and unrelenting workload* remain very much intact.

Conclusion

The role of public school principal is not sustainable under the current increased, extensive, and excessive and unrelenting professional demands. The increased bureaucratic expectations and requirements are negatively impacting upon school principal health and wellbeing and school leadership productivity. Additionally, relatively recent additional challenges, such as the shortage of teachers and school leaders, the increased complexities in supporting teacher and student health wellbeing during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as lack of clarity about the public school principal role, are exacerbating the challenges that public school principals face, leading to unsustainability.

Substantial changes are needed at a systems-level to reduce these overarching demands placed upon all public school principals.

Recommendations

Arising from the literature review research study analysis, the following recommendations are for immediate consideration and future action:

1. Use existing literature, inclusive of reports and research studies, to facilitate professional discussions on how the public school principal role can change to better respond to competing professional demands.
2. Use existing literature, inclusive of reports and research studies, to plan, position, and implement supportive and innovative policy to establish priorities that better support public school principals.
3. Equating cost with excessive and unrelenting public school principal workloads will provide a scaffold for the prioritisation of actions.
4. Active engagement with professional associations, unions, and state/federal governments. A *collective voice* will be required to put in place solutions to the problem of increased and unsustainable professional demands upon public school principals.
5. Federal and state governments to review public school principal administration demands.
6. Government to introduce leadership support mechanisms; implementing additional leadership roles to support public school principals with the competing professional demands.
7. Government to provide greater autonomy to public school principals. Such action will better position public school principals to make and implement informed decisions that best serve their school community.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Literature analysis summary table

Literature analysis summary table	
1	Arnold, B., Rahimi, M., & Riley, P. (2023). The mental health of leaders in Australian government schools: Stress and burnout over a decade (2011-2020).
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Literature analysis summary table

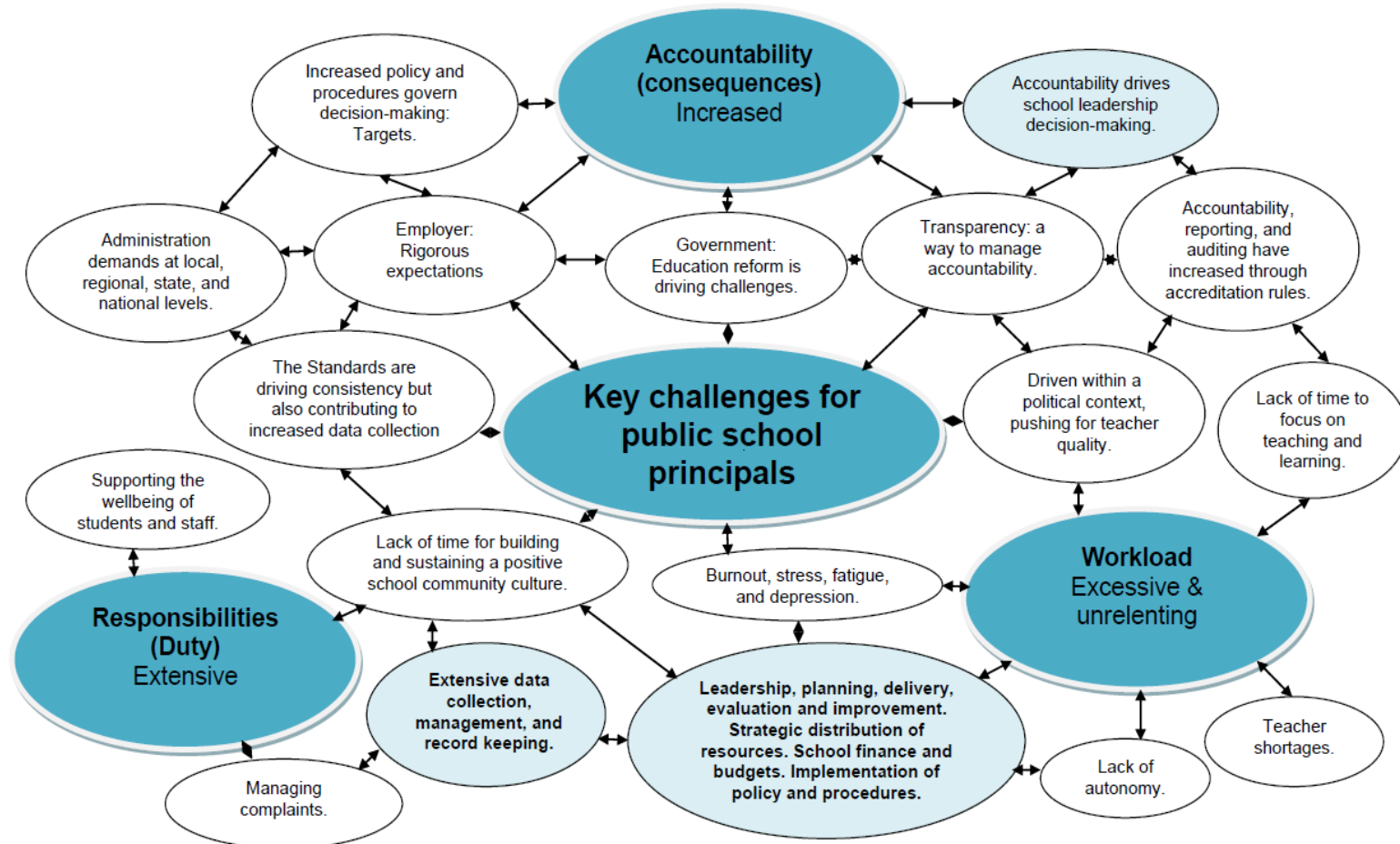
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Literature analysis summary table	
96	Riley, P., & See, S-M., Marsh, H., & Dicke, T. (2021). <i>The Australian principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing survey 2020 data.</i>
97	See, S-M., Marsh, H., & Dicke, T. (2022). The Australian principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing survey 2021 data.
98	See, S-M., Kidson, P., Dicke, T., & Marsh, H. (2023). <i>The Australian principal occupational health, safety, and wellbeing survey 2022 data.</i>
99	Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO). (2023, June). <i>Principal Health and Wellbeing. Independent assurance report to parliament.</i>
100	Weldon, P. R., & Ingvarson, L. (2016, October). <i>School staff workload study: Final report to the Australian Education Union–Victorian branch.</i>

Appendix B: Intended de-limitations

De-limitations	Justification
<p>1. Literature not referring to school principal leadership is not included.</p> <p>2. Literature dates are limited to 2013-2023, inclusive.</p> <p>3. Literature not available online to the general public was not chosen for this research study.</p> <p>4. Other sources of information were not included (e.g. media reports).</p>	<p>1. The literature sample needed to address the research aim and research questions.</p> <p>2. The publication dates aligned with the justification of the research setting.</p> <p>3. Access needed to be readily available, online; a quality aligning with the research study's aim of contributing to professional and public discourse.</p> <p>4. Other sources of information were not included due to the scope of this research study, focusing on AITSL documents (2013-2023); state and territory Department for Education and Department of Education documents (2013-2023), and Australian-focused peer-reviewed academic journal articles with a focus on the school principal role (2013-2023).</p>

Appendix C: Significant challenges, associated key challenges and connections



Excessive and unrelenting workload; increased accountability, and extensive responsibilities (researcher's critical analysis)

Appendix D: Public school principal numbers 2013-2023

State/Territory	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
ACT	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	762	750	752	780	806	815	814	814
NSW	2205	2180	2146	2150	2189	2120	2430	2348	2398	2397	NA ¹
NT	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	201
QLD	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹
SA	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	NA ¹	570	549	545	565	563
TAS	NA ¹	NA ¹	489 AP ²	522 AP ²	562 AP ²	NA ¹	553AP ²	521AP ²	525AP ²	534AP ²	NA ¹
VIC ³	NA ¹	3028	3032	3008	3071	3135	3230	3306	3385	3424	3580
WA	770	NA ¹	781	782	781	793	795	800	804	808	813

¹ NA = Not available

² AP = Includes Assistant Principal

³ Includes Assistant Principals and Liaison Principal

Appendix E: Key challenges of impact upon school leadership

National	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2013-2022	ItD ²
Workload quantity	7.70	7.65	7.76	7.85	8.05	8.13	8.21	7.87	7.98	8.18	NA ¹	0.33	
Lack of time – T&L	7.53	7.56	7.75	7.80	7.94	7.93	7.87	7.36	7.54	7.95	NA ¹	0.2	
Teacher shortages	3.86	3.60	3.59	3.94	4.41	4.62	5.14	4.22	5.36	7.33	NA ¹	3.47	
Student wellbeing - health	6.07	5.99	6.38	6.52	6.66	6.93	7.24	6.92	7.05	7.27	NA ¹	1.2	
Staff wellbeing - health	5.64	5.61	5.86	5.96	6.06	6.45	6.74	6.48	6.69	7.20	NA ¹	1.56	
Employer expectations	6.80	6.76	6.80	6.92	6.94	7.07	7.14	6.80	6.96	7.02	NA ¹	0.22	
Government reforms	6.55	6.42	6.27	6.52	6.32	6.59	6.19	6.10	6.27	6.53	NA ¹	-0.02	
Lack of autonomy	4.51	4.36	4.25	4.57	4.49	4.46	4.69	4.64	4.68	5.15	NA ¹	0.64	
Managing complaints	4.86	4.80	4.95	4.93	5.10	5.07	5.31	5.38	5.41	5.60	NA ¹	0.74	

¹NA = Not available

²ItD = Increase to date

Data inclusive of *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey 2022 Data* (See, Kidson, Dicke, & Marsh, 2023, pp.22-23).