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# **INVISIBLE LABOUR: PRINCIPALS' EMOTIONAL LABOUR IN VOLATILE TIMES**

**REPORT THREE:  
THE ESCALATION OF  
VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS  
AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS  
FOR PRINCIPALS'  
EMOTIONAL LABOUR**

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Professor Jane Wilkinson,  
Professor Lucas Walsh,  
Dr Christine Grice,  
Dr Fiona Longmuir,  
Dr Philippa Chandler,  
Professor Amanda Keddie  
and Tim Delany

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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#### 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

This report provides findings from the ARC Discovery Grant (DP230100594) research project: *Invisible Labour: Principals' Emotional Labour in Volatile Times*. A collaboration between Monash University, Deakin University and the University of Sydney, this third report explores the *Escalation of Violence in Schools and Its Repercussions for Principals' Emotional Labour*.

The report investigates the rising violence in Australian schools and its profound impact on the emotional labour of public-school principals. Drawing on 298 critical incident testimonies from 256 public-school principals, corroborated by stakeholder interviews, case studies and a policy audit, the research reveals how principals are increasingly expected to manage physical threats, gendered violence and systemic neglect—often without adequate support or recognition.

## KEY FINDINGS

- 1. Escalation and Normalisation of Violence:** Over half of respondents (64.8%) described a critical incident involving physical violence, threats of violence **and/or** gendered violence, sexual harassment or sexual abuse. Violence stems from students, parents, staff and community members and is increasingly seen as normalised, i.e., 'just part of the job'. Emotional labour is compounded by lack of physical and psychosocial safety in the workplace. Principals report that bureaucratic hurdles can delay interventions, leaving them exposed to harm. Principals are absorbing the emotional fallout while attempting to maintain their professionalism, often at great cost to their mental and/or physical health.
- 2. Gendered Dimensions of Emotional Labour:** Female principals face disproportionate levels of harassment and gendered violence. Societal expectations of women as caregivers intensify emotional burdens and self-blame. Male principals often suppress vulnerability, reinforcing harmful leadership norms that they must remain stoic and suppress their feelings.
- 3. Collective Solidarity and Support:** Collegial peer networks, peer clinical supervision and occupational health and safety work groups dedicated specifically to principals' health and wellbeing offer vital emotional support. Programs like Victoria's peer clinical supervision pilot and Designated Work Groups (DWGs) show promise in reducing principals' isolation, fostering collective strategies of support and in turn, supporting the medium to long term sustainability of the principalship.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Macro

*(National Level)*

1. Implement the first macro recommendation of Report Two, i.e., full funding of public schools across Australia to 100% of the SRS by the end of the current federal government term.
2. Explicitly reflect psychosocial risk (2024) in the State and Territory role descriptions for principals and education staff.
3. Conduct a national summit on violence in schools. Gendered violence to be a key aspect of the summit.
4. Develop a national plan to address violence and abuse against teachers, school leaders and other school staff. Bring together school system leaders, principal associations, teacher unions, experts in gendered violence in schools, parent associations and other key stakeholders to develop the plan.

### Meso

*(State/Territory Level)*

1. Address the 'normalising' of aggressive and abusive behaviour in schools through instating mechanisms that seek to better understand this normalising in context.
2. Initiate legislative reform that protects principals from occupational violence and clearly defines the employer's duty of care.
3. Provide fair and consistent systems of support for principals managing complex or aggressive behaviours and related complaints from parents and community members.
4. Foster, resource and support collegial support networks. In light of the system pressures reported above, review, foster and reinforce partnerships with key principal stakeholders, such as unions and professional associations, to leverage real-time advocacy to address the acute risks identified by this project.
5. In conjunction with unions and principals' associations, establish Designated Work Groups (DWGs) under the various state and territories OH&S legislation that are specifically for principals' OH&S and psychosocial safety.
6. The relevant departments should foster stronger alliances between police and health to support principals during critical incidents.
7. Foster a pipeline of teachers into the principalship comprising women and people from historically marginalised groups to redress their ongoing under-representation.
8. Incorporate equity leadership capabilities into principal duty statements and descriptions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Micro*

*(School Level)*

1. Embed in schools, Gender Equality Plans and Respectful Relationships programs that address gendered violence towards staff. Include accountability mechanisms.
2. Invest in school-parent and community partnerships programs, with funded training and support, especially in disadvantaged areas, to foster cross-cultural understandings and meaningful and trusting relations of respect and rapport.
3. Provide principals working in rural, remote, and highly disadvantaged schools, with tailored and nuanced support for addressing violence in their schools, such as through the development of community hubs.
4. Invest in community hubs to support principals and school communities in the above locales.
5. Adequately resource rural, remote and highly disadvantaged schools with support staff for social and emotional wellbeing, including social workers and counsellors for students, staff, and principals and specialist support for special needs students.

## IN SUMMARY

Violence in schools is neither inevitable nor acceptable. Principals are bearing the emotional and physical brunt of escalating aggression, often in silence. This report calls for a whole-of-government response that recognises emotional labour as central to educational leadership and prioritises the safety, wellbeing and sustainability of Australia's public-school principals.

# 01

## INTRODUCTION

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 (see details below). A 2023 survey of 50,500 Australian teachers reported that only 26% intend to stay in the profession, down from 58% in 2018 (AITSL, 2025). This is reflective of broader international trends.

The most recent OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey [TALIS] report reveals that Australia ranks amongst the worst performing countries for teacher shortages (third worst performer and double the OECD average), particularly in public schools with high levels of disadvantage and special education needs (OECD, 2025).

These are the “very schools that rely most on stable, experienced teaching staff” (AEU, 2025). 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 and impoverished 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, 2022).

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); a prevalence of mental health issues for children and youth (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Brennan et al., 2021), rising levels of student absenteeism, school disengagement<sup>1</sup> and violence<sup>2</sup> (Dep. of Ed., Australia, 2023), and excessive workloads<sup>3</sup>. 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)<sup>4</sup>. 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 pipeline of quality teachers into the principalship and on principal retention.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Year 10-12 full-time apparent retention rates reveal that between 2014-2024 Catholic and Independent sectors have had little change. In the government sector there has been a decline from 78.6% in 2014 to 74.3% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). In Australia in 2022, “The proportion of the Year 12 population that met the requirements of a Senior Secondary Certificate or equivalent was 76.3% ... Year 12 certification rates ... were higher in major cities (79.4%) than in inner regional areas (67.6%), outer regional areas (69.2%) and remote/very remote areas (55.5%)” and “for the population living in high socio-economic status areas (82.9%) than those in medium and low socio-economic status areas (75.2% and 69.7% respectively) ... the gap between Year 12 certification rates in high socio-economic status areas compared to low socioeconomic status areas has widened” (ACARA, 2024a, p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> On average principals work 55 hours per week (VAGO, 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).

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 principals' 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.

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 (Dep. of Ed. Australia, 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 (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 complexity<sup>5</sup>.

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 **third** 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

<sup>5</sup> Analysis of the 2021 Census provides data on the age profiles of teachers in the private and public sectors. It shows that 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:**

- (i) 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;
- (ii) 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
- (iii) 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

### **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY EMOTIONAL LABOUR?**

The definition we use in our project varies from the standard definition provided at the start of this report. 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 (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 broader phenomenon of rapidly declining principal and teacher workplace health, safety and wellbeing that is negatively impacting the attraction and retention of Australian educators into the profession.

## ABOUT THESE REPORTS

This report (Report Three) is the third 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 examines how emotional labour impacts on the individual principal. Report Three (this report) examines how schools impact the emotional labour of principals. Report Four examines the impact of education systems on principals' emotional labour. The suite of reports focuses on 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 findings<sup>6</sup>.

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 burnout<sup>7</sup>. 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 respond 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 anonymous principal testimonies are on our website. [monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times](https://monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times) Further publications will explore our detailed case studies on individual schools. Within this document, you can click on this Weblink icon to access more testimonies and data.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>6</sup> The wording of critical incident testimonies and stakeholder interviews has been slightly changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>8</sup> WorkSafe Victoria reported a 22% increase in claims from educators in 2022-2023, with total costs for the two-year period of more than \$50 million (Al Afreed, F. M., et al. 2022).

# 02

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### THEME FOUR: THE ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS FOR PRINCIPALS' EMOTIONAL LABOUR

There are increasing physical and psychosocial hazards associated with being a principal. In a 2024 survey of Australian school leaders, 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). Student-enacted violence amounted to 80.4 percent of incidents (Dicke et al., 2025). 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 (Halliday, 2024). WorkSafe Victoria reported a 22% increase in claims from educators in 2022-2023, with total costs for the two-year period more than \$50 million. A significant factor in the loss of educators is that schools are increasingly experienced as unsafe working environments (Longmuir et al., 2024).

Australian schools are microcosms of society. As such, Australian schools have been historically unsafe for a range of demographics including people from historically excluded groups such as

Indigenous, refugee and minority ethnic students, educators and leaders, as well as girls and women and students of diverse sexualities and with disabilities (Blackmore et al., 2025; Molla, 2023; Royal Commission, 2021; Ullman, 2015; Yoorrook Justice Commission). The escalation in violence is not confined to public education. The statistics quoted in the previous paragraph include Catholic, Independent as well as public schools.

However, there are two aspects of violence that differ from the past. Firstly, the escalation of violence in schools. Our data reveal that this violence emanates from a range of stakeholder groups: students, caregivers, community members and sometimes educators. It includes threats, bullying, sexual harassment, damage to property, physical violence and gendered violence. It takes place in school sites, outside school (but with knock-on effects in schools) and online. Secondly, this violence appears to have been 'normalised' – that is, it is understood as part and parcel of the principals' job. As one experienced former primary principal commented after hearing some of the most egregious of our de-identified principal testimonies, "that's just another normal day at school for me".

What are the reasons for the escalation of violence in schools? Reasons vary but

research, including our study, suggests that the 'knock-on' effects of school closures and other societal measures to combat COVID19 during the pandemic have exacerbated relational tensions in society. This has led to greater levels of anxiety and mental health issues more broadly and a lowering of the threshold of tolerance (see paragraph below). For children and young people, the exacerbation of relational tensions is reflected in a significant increase in expulsions for "aggressive behaviour" and "continued disobedience" in schools (Piltz et al., 2025). Males, those living in geographically remote or very remote areas, and those from the most socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented in these expulsion rates (Piltz et al., 2025). This is particularly concerning given the historic school to incarceration pipeline for these groups of young people (Keynes, et al., 2024).

Economic inequities have compounded with an increase in housing stress and poverty (Wilkins et al., 2024). The community is grappling with record levels of mental health issues for children and youth exacerbated by the pandemic (Brennan et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2023). Socially, the rise of social media and populist politics has lowered the bar when it comes to what is counted as 'acceptable' to say and do online and in civil society.

In addition, the federal and state government's emphasis on parental choice (education as a private rather than public good) has changed parent expectations about what schools can and should provide (MacDonald et al., 2023). These heightened expectations have been accompanied by the depletion of public services and the systemic failure of state and federal governments to meet minimum SRS standards for government schools (Greenwell & Bonnor, 2022). This has led to a growing parental disenchantment with government schools (Larsen, 2024). For low SES communities it means that public schools must support students (and communities) from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, with increasingly complex needs, but with less support and resources than their neighbouring non-government schools (Cobbold, 2024). These broader economic and social conditions, along with a variety of other factors, have led to a 'perfect storm' that is being reflected in the escalation in violence in schools.

The critical incident testimonies provided by Australian principals to our study depict a range of offensive behaviours, as defined by psychosocial measurement tools (Burr et al.

2019) and previous research on Australian principals (Dicke et al., 2024; Dicke et al., 2025). Of note, however, this report includes a new category in these violence statistics, that of gendered violence and sexual harassment.

The violence covered a range of behaviours with (1) physical violence, (2) threats of violence and (3) gendered violence, sexual harassment and/or sexual abuse as the three largest categories. For example, 37.1% of survey respondents described a critical incident involving physical violence, 24.6% described incidents involving threats of violence and 23.8% described incidents involving gendered violence, sexual harassment, or sexual abuse. If these three categories are combined, over half of respondents (65.2%) described a critical incident involving physical violence, threats of violence **and/or** gendered violence, sexual harassment or sexual abuse. Please see the appendix for more information.

The types of violence noted by the principal respondents covered a range of stakeholders, and emanated from students, parents, community and occasionally school staff. In many cases, a critical incident included multiple or overlapping offensive behaviours.

For example, a student might be accused of sexual assault and their angry parent threatened the principal or other parents.

Given the wide range of offensive behaviours described in the critical incident testimonies, it is not possible to cover all perspectives. We have selected a small number of testimonies which exemplify many of the shared issues reported by principals. More narratives are available on our project website, and further statistical details are provided in the appendix along with additional categories.

Critical incident testimonies highlight, in the principals' voices, the violent incidents they are encountering in their daily work. These include verbal violence, physical violence resulting in injuries and damage to personal and school property. They also include incidents of gendered violence that may have been amplified by the rise of online misogynistic 'influencers' who target boys and young men (Wescott & Roberts, 2025).

#### **Threats of Violence/Damage to Property/Bullying**

In the following testimony, verbal violence and damage to personal property requires police intervention:

*"A parent became very volatile when their child was suspended for hitting another child. An added frustration was that their child did not receive [a sought-after] award. As a result, the parent verbally abused me, [damaged] my car, took photos of my number plate and posted it on social media ... The parent sent threatening messages about me to [staff] ... I was definitely fearful for my own and staff safety. I sought support from the department and had onsite security ... I made a police report and then obtained a restraining order preventing the parent from coming onto school site or being near me."*

**(FEMALE PRINCIPAL, RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL)**

At the same time, the principal feels a deep responsibility for children and staff, resulting in emotions of crippling fear and poor mental health:

*"I supported staff through this by accessing onsite counselling, however, I did not realise the impact on my own wellbeing for several months and have been receiving professional support since. I felt a keen*

*sense of responsibility for the safety of my school community at that time. I was very anxious and frightened at the time. It stopped me sleeping. I was anxious about being out in the community, fearing that someone was going to attack me as they could identify me by my number plate ... this incident played a significant part in my poor mental health."*

**(Female principal, rural primary school)**

The support the principal received from counselling, her team and the police enabled her to keep going. However, it did not protect her from the psychosocial risk that a lack of immediate support had on her ongoing capacity to work.

Violence is not a 'one-off' in schools. Principals report that repeated violence and verbal abuse is part of their everyday work, as an experienced rural primary principal shares:

*"I wish that people understood the sorts of things that we face in our day to day work... this particular parent (and several others in that year group) had been making verbally abusive comments towards myself and other staff ... (including complaining about my professional conduct – all investigated and dismissed) which can only be described as bullying behaviour. Unfortunately, there is no mechanism to stop this abuse in our system and it does have a significant toll on wellbeing."*

**(Female principal, rural primary school).**

In a prevalent theme throughout the testimonies, the same principal speaks of feeling unsupported by their employer, while simultaneously feeling depleted by the ongoing demands of administrative tasks. She recounts:

*"I was disappointed in the poor manner that it was handled by our department – it felt like I was expendable at times and that keeping parents/public happy was more important than supporting me. I am glad that things have changed and that Principal wellbeing has more of a profile than it did a few years ago. I learnt that I do need to look after my well being – without me being well I am less able to be present and focused on others in my workplace that I am responsible for. It is this heavy weight of responsibility that many of my principal colleagues find drains us the most, alongside meaningless paperwork/admin tasks."*

**(Female principal, rural primary school).**

Principals report regularly dealing with verbal abuse and administrative overload. Although system and government visibility of principal wellbeing is increasing, many of the principals' testimonies express feelings of insufficient recognition and support both during and after critical incidents.

Violence in school communities can also be directed towards other community members and students. Due to the nature of their role, the principal remains responsible for the wellbeing of students both on and off-site.

This means that the job 'never ends':

*"During an intense school community fight a parent chose to stalk another school parent, following them in the [shops] loudly abusing them, parking outside their home and continuing to loudly abuse and threaten them."*

**(Female principal, rural primary school).**

The violence led to a child being hospitalised. The principal reflected on what happened next:

*"The uproar and angst in the community was immense ... At first, and for a number of days the incident meant that I had to be on high alert for the community, filtering all of the misinformation, providing updates without giving too much information, supporting the staff of the school while their emotions were skyrocketing."*

*I worked on auto pilot to get the things done that needed doing and looking after others. I experienced massive nightmares and an increase in my anxiety levels – although no one on my staff or in the community would have been aware of this."*

*Many people wanted to know everything that was happening, with ongoing updates, even though I often did not have further information."*

**(Female principal, rural primary school).**

The reaction of teaching staff to the incident created its own set of challenges. It necessitated the principal exercising a great deal of emotional labour:

*"Also many staff members overstepped their boundaries and became involved in conversations that were not theirs to be had. I really wish that people would understand that while a principal is trying to manage a situation that they sometimes do not have the answers but are doing their best to find them, that when they have not shared all of the information it is for a professional and confidential reason and that we are using our best judgement in a rapid fire situation with a fast changing environment."*

*All this while also trying to manage our own wellbeing and emotions. I learnt that my level of resilience during incidents is huge, however that putting support in place for myself at the time is critical so that I do not crash soon after – which is what often happens. I cope through adrenaline, but over time, and once the major care and response is complete, I become depleted and have very little in reserve to continue"*

**(Female principal, rural primary school).**

Read the full testimony here.

[monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times/stories](https://monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times/stories)

*Principals' emotions range from reports of feeling bullied, abused, unappreciated and unsupported. While they appreciate that principal well-being is starting to be recognised in policy, this appreciation is counterbalanced by their perceptions that their employer sometimes poorly handles incidents of violence and abuse, with principals being sacrificed at the altar of parental and public perceptions and image-management. Principals' emotional labour is physically manifested in nightmares and rushes of adrenaline. Simultaneously they are making constant judgement calls about what information can be shared, all the while attempting to maintain a mask of professional composure. The emotional labour of this work is sometimes overwhelming.*

## Physical Violence

As part of their role, principals must balance their duty of care to an individual student with their duty of care to other students and staff. Employers also have a duty of care to provide physically and psychosocially safe workplaces for their employees (Safework Australia, 2022). This includes principals. Principal warnings need to be heeded and proactive supports and services put in place, particularly when students (or caregivers) arrive with a history of violence. It also requires that system-leaders be available for principals, particularly at times of acute crisis. The testimony below is emblematic of many of those received:

*"I was assaulted [several] times on one day by a [new] student who was violent. He came with a raft of allegations around violence [etc]. I had approached the [departmental] team to negotiate support before he enrolled, but there was no one from previous locations who was willing to assist, and the ... team indicated that I could do nothing to support him before he enrolled because I would have to complete the paperwork based on what happened at our school.*

*I remember getting frustrated and commenting, "So you need our blood before anything can be done?". The basic consensus was that yes, they needed our experience before we could put anything in place and everything was couched in bureaucratic terms denying the reality or minimising it.*

*The assaults took place in separate places. . . One assault took place after I had gotten him off site and was calling my [line manager] to inform them what had happened ... [the student] charged up and hit me a couple of times. I covered myself and backed towards the office and locked myself in ... my [line manager] had hung up. I was so let down ."*  
**(Male principal, F-12 rural school).**

Click here to read more.

[monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times/stories](https://monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times/stories)

A common refrain in the principals' testimonies was a perceived lack of systemic support as they navigated complex student circumstances. In Report Four, we examine the theme of principals feeling like they have been 'hung out to dry' as they wrestle with increasingly complex and often violent incidents.

A lack of support from the system can lead to severe consequences, as this testimony attests:

*"During remote learning, the parents of [a student with a major history of violence] formally requested the student attend onsite due to their work commitments. The department would not support a denial of this request, so the student attended. During this attendance, the student was placed in an unfamiliar environment with an unfamiliar teacher ... The student quickly became dysregulated, and I was called to assist.*

*The student physically attacked me as I entered the room ... hitting and biting. His parents were called and arrived to collect him. At this point, the student punched me in the face ... The [parent] walked away with the child showing no care, concern or empathy.*

*I suspended the child following this incident and was requested by [the department] to attend an online meeting with the child's family in the days following. I expressed concern at having to attend with a black eye and I was reluctant to be seen by students with such an injury. I asked for support from the [departmental health and wellbeing] team. The help was not forthcoming ... I was shattered and I learned that I could not trust the structures put in place to support principals' health and wellbeing which in my case failed, despite repeated requests."*  
**(Female principal, rural primary school).**

## Gendered Violence

*"Do what I say bitch. I own you; this town owns you."*

**(Male community member addressing a female rural secondary principal; extract from principal testimony).**

An Australian wide study of child and youth maltreatment concluded that teenage boys were the most likely group to offend sexually. Both teenage and younger girls were the most likely to be harmed by teenage boys sexually offending (Haslam et al., 2023). Girls received 2.4 times the rate of sexual abuse (Haslam et al., 2023). Given these facts, a key recommendation of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence was to roll out respectful relationships' programs across all Victorian schools in order to assist in "transforming the attitudes and behaviours of future generations" (Neave et al., 2016, p. 14).

Whilst the Respectful Relationships program (Victorian Department of Education and Training, n.d.-a) and policies such as Victoria's Gender Equality Action Plan 2022-

2025 (Victorian Department of Education and Training, n.d.-b) which focuses on ensuring respectful, inclusive and safe workplaces – are crucial moves, they do not adequately address the incidents of gendered violence against women staff. Recent analysis of 18,172 observations from a longitudinal survey of principal class safety, health and wellbeing reports that

... women school leaders were more likely to experience threats of violence and bullying at work than their male counterparts ... gender, school sector, and role significantly influence the likelihood of experiencing various forms of workplace violence, with women in secondary schools and those in government or Catholic sectors being particularly vulnerable (Blackmore et al., 2025).

Our testimonies paint a disturbing picture of the prevalence and impacts of gendered violence. The nature of this violence is captured in the opening quotation to this section. A testimony from an experienced female principal describes "intimidation by a male parent in-person toward a staff member and myself." While both male and female principals describe being "stalked" by fathers, and share emotions including scared, frightened, "emotional wreck", stressed, and anxious, the following testimony points out that women principals are more likely to experience harassment. This is borne out by the statistics noted above:

*"The most unreasonable and vicious parents are having a major impact on principals and their wellbeing. . . Women principals are far more likely to be the victims of these attacks, from both male and female parents. From whoever it is, it is misogynistic and very damaging."*  
**(Female principal, secondary school, capital city).**

Concerningly, gendered violence does not only occur between staff, students and parents. The following testimony is an account of gendered violence between school leaders:

*"At one time I was required to ask him [deputy principal] to leave my office as he was becoming too emotional, and he needed to take time to reflect on his aggression (body language of clenched fists, snarling, standing over me whilst I was sitting at my desk) ... He returned to my office ... and made a [verbal] threat of violence."*  
**(Female principal, rural secondary school).**

The principal reports that the incident resulted in inadequate support from their system, or other formal avenues. The principal was left feeling vulnerable and

*“in a physically and psychologically unsafe work environment.”*

**(Female principal, rural secondary school).**

In relation to gendered violence between students, stakeholder interviews suggest that there may be an escalation of this kind of violence<sup>9</sup>. In a stakeholder interview, the head of the principals' association reflects on the 'uptick' in sexual misconduct incidents that principals are dealing with in primary and secondary schools:

*“How do I manage the number of disclosures around child sexual assaults or around neglect or around peer-on-peer child sexual assaults in relationships and coercive control between teenagers? And how do I process that in a way that I can sort of wash that off by the time I step through my door at home?”*

*That was quite profound, the two emails from two different members, from two different school contexts. So, one in a primary school and one in a senior secondary college. So, a colleague in a senior secondary college saying, “At the moment I am spending 60% of my working week managing and dealing with student-on-student, student-on-staff – historical, these are – child sexual assault notifications.”*

**(Male leader of principals' organisation).**

Concerningly, however, there may be a lack of awareness amongst some principals about the pervasiveness and seriousness of gendered violence in schools. A senior female in a principals' association observed the following, “I've ... said, ‘You've got to keep the issue of gendered violence on the table’ but the boys [colleagues in the principal associations] are now rolling their eyes”. This observation points to the crucial importance for awareness training about the prevalence and harm of gender-based violence in all its manifestations, and specific policies that support principals, their associations and departments of education to address gendered violence head-on.

In 2025, the Victorian Labor Government announced a plan to introduce new psychosocial regulations by the end of the year – strengthening how psychosocial hazards are managed in the workplace. It argued that “recognising psychosocial hazards” is as important as physical hazards and that the government would be “creating new obligations for employers to identify and control them in their workplaces” (Premier of Victoria, 2025).

This initiative is highly welcome for it places a duty of care on employers to provide a psychologically safe workplace. Our testimonies from public-school principals and stakeholders suggest that school workplaces are frequently neither physically nor psychosocially safe for many principals, for educators and for the students in their care. Gender-based violence is of particular concern. Anecdotally, there are suggestions that these escalated levels of violence may have been normalised by some at least, as an inevitable consequence of doing the job of the principalship. Our data suggests that state government campaigns to raise awareness that threatened or actual violence against school employees is not acceptable is welcome (c.f., Report Four) but inadequate in the challenges facing schools.

## Conclusion

Violence in schools is neither inevitable nor should it be accepted as a normal part of schooling. In saying this however, we warn against knee-jerk ‘solutions’ such as blaming parents or implementing increasingly punitive measures that impact our most highly vulnerable groups of historically excluded students. These so-called ‘solutions’ miss the point, do not tackle the multi-factorial causes of the escalation of violence in schools and most concerningly, will increase harm against those groups of students who have been most harmed by similar policies in the past. Such responses are decontextualised from the broader factors impacting the heightened volatilities in schools that we have outlined in the introduction to this report.

Simplistic solutions also overlook principals and educators' success in implementing a range of approaches that have positive results in making schools safer, more inclusive, and welcoming environments for all – staff, students and community. For instance, Respectful Relationships – when implemented in a holistic way by well trained and supported educators – is a program that principals have cited as supportive in fostering more safe and inclusive environments (Wilkinson

et al., 2020). These strategies typically foster a holistic approach to education that understands and values the assets that children bring from their homes and communities, supports the development of the whole child – academic, social and physical – and builds strong-caregiver, school and community partnerships based on mutual respect and care. These approaches are crucial for all children, but are particularly important for students from highly disadvantaged backgrounds and historically excluded groups (see, for example, work in Indigenous schools around a strengths-based approach (Shay & Sarra, 2026), culturally responsive schooling (Kaukko & Wilkinson, 2020), gender/girls/ disrupting dominant masculinities (Keddie, 2012), and the importance of building strong community-caregiver-school partnerships (Cleveland et al., 2023).

However, these approaches also require funding, time, support, training and professional development for schools. However, they do not tackle the very real issues of violence against principals and gendered violence against women. Moreover, these programs are enriched and nurtured by a service culture from systems and governments of ‘no blame’, as well as acceptance of risk – there will be mistakes made along the way but principals and schools need to be reassured that they are being nurtured and supported to do this important work. As Report Four suggests, these conditions are lacking in current circumstances where a ‘blame and shame’ culture from departments, governments and the media leaves principals feeling increasingly “hung out to dry” (see Report Four).

Finally, schools cannot do the heavy lifting on societal violence alone. Our recommendations at the end of this report sketch some next steps but must be taken as one set of responses in a broader, more holistic, whole of government approach to these pressing issues.

## FOOTNOTE

<sup>9</sup> One aspect of this escalation is regular exposure to sexual images which can “may strengthen attitudes supportive of sexual violence and violence against women” (Quadara et al., 2017). A review of research states that “nearly half of children between the ages of 9-16 experience regular exposure to sexual images ... Young males are more likely than females to deliberately seek out pornography and to do so frequently ... Pornography may strengthen attitudes supportive of sexual violence and violence against women” (Quadara et al., 2017).

### THEME FIVE: SOCIAL VOLATILITIES AND GENDER

The intensity and complexity of emotional labour is often greater for principals from historically excluded groups (APPA & NATSIPA, 2025; Ispa-Landa & Thomas, 2019). The Australian principalship is predominantly white and Anglo Celtic and is unrepresentative of the nation's highly multicultural demographic (Rice et al., 2023). Despite being a highly feminised profession, women are still under-represented in the Australian principalship (AITSL, 2021; Watterson & Ehrich, 2024). When women do gain leadership roles, it typically takes 1.5 to 2.7 years longer than it does for men despite having similar experience levels (AITSL, 2021). This is reflected in the leadership roles of principals' associations where women remain highly underrepresented. When women do become principals, they are over-represented in traditionally hard to staff schools where the emotional labour is most intense and complex (MacDonald, 2023).

Furthermore, gender norms around the types of work that women are expected to perform can undermine women's ability to establish their authority in their workplaces (Ispa-Landa & Thomas, 2019). In Blackmore's

(1996) research, women principals reported feeling limited by gendered discourses that established expectations that they would perform more 'caring and sharing' duties (p. 348). In addition, cultural norms around who delivers caregiving labour often assigns different workloads to men and women and informs aspects of interpersonal relationships between colleagues (Wharton, 2009). Women leaders have also reported the management of their emotions at their work to be a great challenge (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). Although principals are often positioned in their schools as 'emotional managers', many women leaders internalise a corporatised presentation that guides their behaviour in their role (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). These issues have been apparent in our research.

The racial identities of leaders can also inform how the emotional components of leadership are conceptualised and perceived. Ispa-Landa and Thomas' (2019) research on race, gender and emotion work among US school principals in their beginning years found differences between how white women and women of colour understood their leadership roles. White women felt the pressure to be 'nice' and have an open-door policy to staff (Ispa-Landa & Thomas, 2019).

They felt that this approach was incompatible with an authoritative leadership style. In contrast, women of colour viewed the two approaches as complementary, i.e., you could be authoritative, and this style did not conflict with their emotional availability to staff, students and community (Ispa-Landa & Thomas, 2019).

Absent in much of the scholarship around the emotions of leading is an understanding of how emotions are socially constructed, presented and perceived according to one's gender, 'race' and class (Blackmore, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2014). As one male principal recounts in his testimony:

*"Men don't like to talk about things that are touchy. I just needed some time because I was mentally drained – typing this is the first time I have publicly admitted to the real reason – Admitting weakness or vulnerability goes against things like your pride – being stoic – hard things to let go off when you hold such a public facing position in leading a school."*

**(MALE PRINCIPAL, RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL)**

The critical incident testimonies reveal many commonalities between male and female principals. Both women and men are engaged in complex and diverse care work as they manage critical incidents at their schools. Both consistently describe similar emotions such as fear, vulnerability, anger, or distress. Sometimes, they report on more positive emotions such as a sense of satisfaction for a job well done. However, there are several ways in which their accounts differ, suggesting broader gendered expectations about leadership and care.

For female principals, societal expectations of women as caregivers and nurturers appear to lead to *additional emotional burdens in their professional roles*. For instance, many of the women principals report feeling that they should prioritise the emotional needs of others over their own. This, then, can lead to neglect of their own emotional and mental health needs. As one principal notes:

*"I supported staff through this [incident] by accessing onsite counselling... I did not realise the impact on my own wellbeing for several months."*

**(Female principal, primary, rural).**

In another incident, a female principal describes her ongoing trauma after being verbally abused and threatened by a parent. She reports how she has had to manage the emotional fallout among her staff, particularly male colleagues, after the incident:

*"I had to deal with their emotions as well as the police and put on a happy face for the rest of the week."*

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

The expectation to absorb the emotions of others and maintain a positive outward appearance reflects the emotional caregiving labour commonly expected of women in leadership. This also emerges in testimonials from male participants, but with some differences as outlined below.

The women's testimonials reveal a tendency toward *self-blame/recrimination* and *self-doubt in their competence as leaders*. This pattern reflects broader societal expectations that women take on greater emotional responsibility, not only for the outcomes of challenging situations but also for the emotional well-being of those around them. This can lead to women internalising blame and feeling responsible when things go wrong, even when the circumstances are beyond their control. For example, after the tragic suicide of a student, one principal reflects on her actions and constantly questions her competence:

*"I question my actions and reactions constantly... there was no support offered to me"*

**(Female principal, primary, capital city).**

Despite leading the community through a traumatic event, the principal still doubts whether she did enough, highlighting how self-blame is a recurring theme when women in leadership positions are faced with complex crises. Her self-doubt is compounded by a lack of institutional support, which intensifies her emotional burden.

When women principals speak up about the traumas they are experiencing, they may be disbelieved or the incident/s minimised. One male principal association stakeholder remarks:

*"When [women principals] seek support, it can be dismissed perhaps, dare I say, more so than perhaps when a male reports some of these things, it tends to be elevated or listened to, if that makes sense."*

**(Male leader of principals' organisation, stakeholder interview).**

His observation is corroborated by a teacher union occupational health and safety representative who remarks:

*"when male principals and OH&S reps raise issues [with the department], particularly psycho-social issues, men are listened to and taken more seriously than women."*

**(Female union representative, case study).**

Our study provides anecdotal evidence that female principals' complaints are dismissed or downplayed. This anecdotal evidence is corroborated by research in the legal (Epstein & Goodman, 2019) and health care systems (National Women's Health Advisory Council, 2024) which reveals a pattern of institutional downplaying or dismissal of women's concerns and complaints. This dismissal or minimisation of concerns has been described as a form of "institutional betrayal" (Epstein & Goodman, 2019, p. 400) for it exacerbates the harms women are experiencing and prevents them from obtaining "safety ... justice" (Epstein & Goodman, 2019, p. 400) and good health outcomes (National Women's Health Advisory Council, 2024).

In contrast to the women's testimonials, which often featured self-blame or questioning of competence, male principals were slightly more likely to *externalise their frustrations, placing blame on systemic failures or external obstacles*. This reflects a gendered expectation that men should maintain confidence in their abilities, even when faced with difficulties. For instance, after feeling unsupported during a critical incident, one principal expressed frustration with the education system. However, his focus was on how the system failed him:

*"The director basically threw me under the bus."*

**(Male principal, secondary school, rural).**

Moreover, gendered expectations of men as 'strong', resilient and stoic in the face of adversity played out in the narratives. The men's testimonials frequently emphasised *resilience and the ability to withstand emotional strain without breaking down*. While they acknowledged the challenges and frustrations of their roles, men's accounts were more likely to view emotional labour as a test of endurance. They tended to focus on how they "got through it" rather than on its emotional toll. But the evidence from the testimonies shows male principals are feeling the emotional and physical toll of their work.

For instance, after a prolonged conflict with hostile parents and a lack of support from the education system, one principal reflected on his mental health struggles:

*"It effected (sic) my mental health, I became reclusive and had trouble sleeping."*

**(Male principal, secondary school, rural).**

As one stakeholder interviewee remarked:

*"Males tend to hold their cards, and certainly that was my experience where I did not seek help and I was not travelling well at all. And nobody probably would know that about me other than my wife and my children, whereas perhaps I think our female staff are a bit better at rallying around each other, their colleagues, and maybe feel safer to do that."*

**(Male leader of principals' association).**

As Report Two notes, both women and men describe the importance of maintaining an outer mask of strength, no matter how they might be feeling inside. However, where their accounts differ is that female principals often acknowledge the emotional toll more openly but are conflicted about showing vulnerability, as they fear it may be perceived as weakness. One principal describes how:

*"I had to fake how I was truly feeling so as not to look weak, to be in a position to support staff."*

**(Female principal, primary school, rural).**

Male principals often framed their emotional labour in terms of maintaining control, authority, and leadership. The caregiving they provide is often expressed as protecting others and managing crises, with less emphasis on their own emotional needs. For instance, after dealing with a violent incident involving a knife assault, one male principal reflects on the pressure to maintain control and follow proper procedures, while feeling unsupported by the education system. He describes his role as managing the safety of others and protecting the school but does not express the same level of emotional vulnerability as the women principals. Instead, he emphasises resilience:

*"The system is out to protect itself... you need to be resilient."*

**(Male principal, secondary, rural).**

In another testimony, after describing how he physically restrains a violent student, a principal observes that:

*"I had acted according to the correct processes."*

**(Male principal, primary, rural).**

His care is expressed through maintaining control and ensuring the safety of others. Both these accounts reflect traditional expectations for men in leadership roles to remain stoic, composed and focused on solutions, with less space to express personal emotional struggles. This focus on protection rather than emotional caregiving differs from the women's testimonials, where women principals often balance emotional support for others with feelings of personal vulnerability.

Occasionally, however, the testimonies challenge gendered expectations that male principals maintain a mask of stoicism, resilience and 'strength'. After a major tragedy in which people were killed, one male principal wrote:

*"This was the most complex and hardest work I have ever done – as I needed to be a community leader at this time AND a school principal to staff, students and the community.*

*Feelings? Very humble and re-defined servant leadership. Will I be able to cope with this – as a leader, as a husband, as a man? It was very profound ... people need to realise that principals are human too – family, feelings etc."*

**(Male principal, secondary, regional).**

Testimonies reveal societal expectations of women as caregivers and nurturers. That is, there is an implicit expectation that women should carry an additional emotional burden in their professional roles, by prioritising the emotional needs of others over themselves.

### **THEME SIX: EMOTIONAL LABOUR AS A COLLECTIVE ACT OF SOLIDARITY**

A key role of the principal is to be the outward-facing leader of the school community as they build alliances. However, due to the very nature of their role, principals must keep much of what they do or hear in confidence. Despite public school principals being part of an education system, feeling alone and isolated is a common feature of senior management roles such as the principalship (Dorhaim & Oplatka, 2019). The inability to share with others adds to the complexity and intensity of principals' emotional labour. This is where training, professional development, the cultivation of networks where one can safely disclose, mentoring, and clinical supervision are all examples of strategies to support principals and build their psychological resilience (McKay et al., 2025).

In the testimonies, stakeholder interviews and case studies, principals shared several examples of support and strategies that nurtured their well-being, built individual efficacy and fostered a greater sense of solidarity with their colleagues. Moreover, as noted in Report One, our research team's actions in sharing deidentified principal testimonies in principal association and union meetings appeared to help to build a more collective sense of solidarity for some. Seeing words on the page that they could relate to helped principals understand that they were not alone in experiencing a range of emotions such as fear, vulnerability, self-doubt and in more acute cases, thoughts of suicide. As one principal remarked at a stakeholder forum after he saw testimonies from the critical incidents, "I thought I was alone in feeling this way but now I see that is not the case".

A range of networks, including principal associations and those within teacher unions, were noted in the principal testimonies as crucial in overcoming isolation and aiding retention in the principalship. These supports are crucial across all stages of the principalship but are particularly important in the first years of the role as the testimony below attests. Research on the principalship reveals that hard-to-staff school communities and diminished system support pose a severe occupational hazard for new principals, leading to their untimely exit from the workforce (Riley et al., 2021).

The following testimony attests to the importance of supports provided by education departments<sup>10</sup>. In this case it was an early intervention program in Victoria that allowed principals to confidentially access health providers to manage their physical and mental health. The principal was in her first five years of the role in a rural locale:

*"Student lied [and] tried to get a teacher fired. Community involved themselves [on social media]. Police, Region and non-school related persons all involved themselves. [It] took a mountain load of wasted hours to get everyone to follow the correct process and to ensure the safe and collaborative culture of the school wasn't hijacked by unsubstantiated claims.*

*[I felt] overworked. Incompetent. Exhausted. Undervalued. Unappreciated. I also felt skipped and that others were trying to avoid me and go straight to the media/police. I wish people understood how high I hold the respect and connection involved with ensuring any and everything is followed up with integrity. I learned to continue in my*

*ways, only communicating what I needed to and who I needed to. I learned to ensure this mantra was continuously embedded with all of my staff. I learned to work harder at highlighting all the amazing work happening at the school, as the 'good' stuff gets quickly forgotten and isn't as easily shared and 'gossiped' about – yet many people were happy to share the 'bad' stuff'.*

*The impact on my family was very unfair. The headspace and constant focus, even when not at school or during a weekday or work hours took its toll. It required extra deliberate wellbeing strategies by me to ensure a mental health episode didn't eventuate for me. The Early Intervention Principal Program was a huge part of this."*

**(Female principal, primary, rural).**

This critical incident also demonstrates that principal induction and support can have a positive impact on principal wellbeing. System support can diminish the hero/martyr trope experienced and enacted by principals as they lead communities.

### **FOOTNOTE**

<sup>10</sup> Principals mentioned a range of positive supports including having a supportive manager, Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategies, principals' networks, principal preparation programmes like Take The Lead in Queensland, access to mentors and high-quality psychological support beyond the standard Employee Assistance Program.

A pilot program of peer clinical supervision run by the Victorian Department of Education was described as a “gamechanger” by one highly experienced principal of a socially disadvantaged school. “The program involves a group of five to six principals meeting with a social worker every two to three weeks for 90 minutes to share issues of concern or challenges. The principal recounts:

*“... it's very informal. Sometimes I'll go in and go, “There's nothing really bothering me”, so I'll sit back and other people might be going through some tougher stuff. And then there'll be times where I'm feeling really frustrated about something, so I will talk more.”*

**(Male principal, primary school, capital city, case study).**

The principal described the meetings as “really good; it's been amazing, actually, just to relate to others on a different level and know that we're going through the same sort of challenges”. He commented on the value of the interpersonal connections developed in the group meetings:

*“I reckon it has accelerated our interpersonal connections big time. So we know each other on a far more personal level than we did ... you're making connections with people on a really personal level ... so you're hearing about people's private life challenges ... we share each other's frustrations. And it's gotten to the point where you can – people can be more themselves, as far as go in there and go, “I've had a really shit couple of weeks”, or whatever it was, they probably wouldn't normally have expressed that.”*

**(Male principal, primary school, capital city, case study).**

The principal had subsequently organised for the social worker to come to the school regularly to support “one-on-one debriefing with staff ... when we've had some bad stuff happen”.

Research into the Victorian pilot of the peer clinical supervision program supported this perspective, showing that it gave principals

time and space to talk about challenges within their school, share ideas with one another, support one another, and focus on their wellbeing ... [It] helped them build a sense of connection and camaraderie with other school leaders in their geographic area, reduced feelings of loneliness and isolation, helped them see that others were experiencing similar challenges, allowed them to share individual experiences and expertise, and developed deep and sustained relationships between group members (McKay et al., 2025).

Developing and supporting individual and peer coping strategies and building resilience is important. However, our findings on the unsafe nature of principals' workplace conditions suggest that we need to look beyond individualised, psychological responses to focus on larger scale interventions and responses.

One example of such an approach is the formation of Designated Working Groups [DWG's] for principals in some Victorian education networks. The DWG's arise from the Victorian Occupational Health and Safety Legislation (2004) and focus specifically on principal class occupational health, safety and wellbeing. Case study number four of our study examines the DWG's in more detail. However, in brief, the DWG's are led by a current principal in the regional network who is an elected Health and Safety Representative (HSR) for the DWG. Crucial aspects of these DWG's that were raised by our participants were that they (a) raise principals' awareness that they are employees of the department, with the same rights (and responsibilities) as other employees to a safe workplace; (b) that the DWG's are able to utilise the powers under the OH&S act to support principals' safety, health and wellbeing, and (c) that they have a crucial educative function for principals and departmental employees.

The findings from our research presented in the preceding three themes lead to our recommendations.

# 03

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**T**he emotional labour of principals is increasingly intense, complex and unsustainable without systemic change. The authors acknowledge the intense pressures that are confronting education systems across Australia. Hence, we divide our recommendations into macro, meso and micro levels to capture the complex, interconnected nature of these conditions.

The macro level encompasses the federal government and related agencies, such as Australian Institute for Teaching (AITSL), and Safework Australia. The macro level recognises the need for a national response, which encompasses the meso level of state and territories. Micro levels encompass schools and their communities, whilst recognising that conditions at micro level are shaped by macro and meso levels of governance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE (NATIONAL)

### *Macro Level:*

1. Implement the first macro recommendation of Report Two, i.e., full funding of public schools across Australia to 100% of the SRS by the end of the current federal government term. Given that government schools overwhelmingly educate the most disadvantaged students in society (Cobbold, 2024), a key means to tackle rising violence includes providing sufficient resources, training and support for schools to adequately support their students and communities. This funding needs to be put into frontline services in schools, not in out-of-school staffing focussed on compliance (c.f. Cobbold, 2025).
2. Explicitly reflect psychosocial risk legislation (2024) in the State and Territory role descriptions for the safety of principals, school leaders, teachers and all staff and to recognise employers' collective responsibility for workplace wellbeing.
3. Conduct a national summit on violence in schools which will be informed by a complete occupational health and safety review of Australian schools conducted by expert researchers in this area. The degree to which gendered violence is internalised and minimised is sobering and must be a key aspect of the summit, the review and the development of a national plan to address violence in schools (see below).
4. Develop a national plan to address violence and abuse against teachers, school leaders and other school staff. The plan would be informed by the preceding summit and review, and would bring together school system leaders, principal associations (including NATSIPA and special school principal associations), teacher unions, experts in gendered violence in schools, parent associations and other key stakeholders. Ensure that historically excluded groups, e.g., NATSIPA, community leaders in rural and remote areas, students with disabilities and African Australian communities are key stakeholders who will inform the national plan so that such recommendations do not unintentionally 'blame the victims'.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE (STATE)

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

### *Meso Level:*

1. Address the 'normalising' of aggressive and abusive behaviour in schools through instating mechanisms that seek to better understand this normalising in context towards more effectively addressing the impacts of violence on principals, teachers, students and school communities. Ensure that these mechanisms are informed by both the national plan noted above and full consultation with historically excluded groups noted above.
2. Initiate legislative reform that protects principals from occupational violence and clearly defines the employer's duty of care.
3. Provide fair and consistent systems of support for principals who are managing complex or aggressive behaviours and related complaints from parents and community members.
4. Build system infrastructures and support for principals to report psychosocial risks and hazards without fear of judgement. For example, Victoria's reporting system Edusafe has capacity for reporting such hazards and risks but is not routinely used by all principals.
5. Better foster, resource and support collegial support networks. These networks are critical in reducing principal isolation and promoting retention (Dorhaim & Oplatka, 2019). These need to be better resourced and amplified.
6. In light of the system pressures reported above, review, foster and reinforce partnerships with key principal stakeholders, such as unions and professional associations, to leverage real-time advocacy to address the acute risks identified by this project.
7. In conjunction with unions and principals' associations, establish Designated Work Groups (DWGs) under the various state and territories OH&S legislation that are specifically for principals' OH&S and psychosocial safety. See the three DWGs in Victoria as examples. Ensure that these are principal led and resourced via a significant time allocation and/or payment. Provide time allocation for all principals to undertake OH&S training – see Australian Education Union (AEU) Victoria for a model of training that is principal focussed and led. See also the suite of case studies that the Department of Education NSW is developing to support psychosocial hazards.
8. Develop a strong system-wide 'service first' culture (VAGO, 2023) towards schools to heal the breakdown in trust between principals and departments of education. This will require a shift away from the systems' current focus on policing and compliance. Departments should work with unions, principal associations, and principals to discuss what this means in practice. Too often, the principals' testimonies recount a lack of follow-up after harrowing critical incidents or, worse, to quote one principal, "I was hung out to dry." The costs of policing and compliance result in excessive workloads (VAGO, 2023), a "trust deficit" between employers and employees (Thomson et al., 2021), escalating Workcover claims (VAGO, 2023) and the attrition of principals and educators. Investment in early support and intervention would be economically prudent and cost effective.
9. Build department level alliances between police, health and media alongside system-wide consultation and support for principals during critical incidents.
10. Foster a pipeline of teachers into the principalship comprising women and people from historically marginalised groups to redress their underrepresentation. Given the principalship (and teaching as a profession) does not reflect Australia's cultural diversity and women as a group remain underrepresented and experience higher levels of violence than males (Blackmore et al., 2025), this will require departments of education and governments to identify and dismantle barriers to the principalship. It will also require governments and systems to ensure schools are more safe, inclusive and welcoming for staff from historically excluded groups. This is where significant consultation with key stakeholders such as NATSIPA, a range of ethnic communities and feminist researchers is crucial.
11. As part of a 'root and branch' overhaul of principals' duty statements and role descriptions (see Report Two), incorporate equity leadership capabilities into these statements and descriptions. Given that schools are microcosms of society and that inequities in society exacerbate violence, particularly for students and staff from historically marginalised groups, including those who are in poverty, this is a key aspect of principals' educational work. See Toronto District's School Board Competencies *Equity Leadership Competencies* as an example of this. See also significant research on culturally responsive teaching, as well as a strengths-based approach to leading and teaching Indigenous students outlined in the earlier section of this report.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE (SCHOOLING)

### *Micro Level:*

1. Provide ongoing professional development for principals, teachers and parents to more closely align their values and practices with key gender justice policy and practice such as the Gender Equality Plan and the Respectful Relationships whole school approach – including instating internal accountability mechanisms to evaluate progress. Ensure these programs address gendered violence towards staff. These policies and programs, while mandated, are not being implemented in schools in the ways intended.
2. Provide professional development for principals and teachers to engage with their communities in culturally respectful and inclusive ways through regular and ongoing community connection projects and initiatives that foster cross-cultural understandings and meaningful and trusting relations of respect and rapport. Investing in school-parent and community partnerships, with funded training and support, especially in disadvantaged areas is crucial.
3. Provide principals working in rural, remote, and highly disadvantaged schools, with tailored and nuanced support for addressing violence in their schools, such as through the development of community hubs (see below).
4. Invest in community hubs to support principals and school communities in the above locales. These hubs offer wrap-around, holistic community services (including housing, health (mental and physical), social services and other supports. This would take the levels of stress off the principal and school staff who are regularly filling in the gaps for high poverty students and their families and communities.
5. Related to the above recommendation, provide rural, remote and highly disadvantaged schools with more support staff for social and emotional wellbeing, including social workers and counsellors for students, staff, and principals and specialist staff for special needs students. Serious investment is needed by governments in supporting schools to develop strong family and community partnerships and outreach. This must not be yet another “add-on” job for principals and schools but be adequately resourced, and training provided for schools.

# Conclusion

**C**rucial goals arising from this report include raising awareness about the escalation of violence in schools including the pervasiveness and extent of gender-based violence amongst the principal class workforce. As our data reveal, principals are experiencing and trying to address high levels of violence, bullying, harassment and intimidation in their work lives. These violent encounters are not isolated incidents – they are daily occurrences. The emotional labour principals are expending in their attempts to navigate and remedy this violence is unacceptably heavy. The gendered dimensions of this violence are concerning.

Whilst policy and practice that seeks to address gender-based violence – especially through a focus on gender respect, inclusion and justice such as the recent *Gender Equality Action Plan 2022-2025* (Victorian Department of Education and Training, n.d.-b) and the whole school approach to *Respectful Relationships Education* (Victorian Department of Education and Training, n.d.-a) – are valuable, they cannot be a panacea for ending such violence. They do not adequately address the extent of gendered violence against women staff, nor the normalisation of both gendered violence and violence in general that is playing out in Australia schools. Schools are a microcosm of society. When violence against staff or female students is normalised, or in the case of gender-based violence, dismissed as just 'boys being boys', then the opportunities to tackle these societal harms are lost. We recognise that much good work is going on in this space (Keddie & Ollis, 2020; Ollis et al., 2021). Our recommendations above need to be read as adding to a crucial broader, whole of government approach to tackling violence and gender-based violence in schools and society.

Moreover, whilst programs such as peer clinical supervision or peer mentoring can build a crucial sense of collective solidarity, the responsibility for principals' overall health and wellbeing should not be laid at the feet of individual principals or the profession as a whole. Such programs are no substitute for governments making the necessary changes to principals' working conditions – such as reducing intensified workload and accountability demands – that are contributing in major ways to these problematic conditions (VAGO, 2023). This is where it is crucial that departments and governments cultivate an ethos of two-way, collective responsibility for children and young people's education, rather than how it is currently experienced, i.e., as unidirectional, top-down demands on principals (and educators more generally). We explore this point further in Report Four, in which many principals report feeling that they are collectively being "hung out to dry" by their employers.

To find out more, explore our other reports on the challenges and rewards of emotional labour on our project website:

🔗 [monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times](https://monash.edu/education/research/projects/school-principals-emotional-labour-in-volatile-times)

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## APPENDIX ONE

<b>TYPE OF HARMFUL BEHAVIOUR</b>	<b>NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS (OUT OF 256)</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS</b>
<b>Physical violence</b>	95	37.1
<b>Threats of violence</b>	63	24.6
<b>Gendered violence, sexual harassment, or sexual abuse</b>	61	23.8
<b>Workplace bullying or undermining by leadership</b>	19	7.4
<b>Bullying</b>	17	6.6
<b>Cyberbullying</b>	15	5.8
<b>Unpleasant teasing</b>	1	0.3
<b>Conflict and quarrels</b>	17	6.6
<b>Gossip and slander</b>	30	11.7

Categories derived from the third version of the Copenhagen psychosocial questionnaire (Burr et al, 2019) and previous research on Australian principals (Dicke et al., 2024; Dicke et al., 2025).

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION**  
**MONASH UNIVERSITY**

WELLINGTON ROAD  
CLAYTON, VICTORIA, 3800  
AUSTRALIA

**T** +61 3 9905 2819  
**E** [EDU-RESEARCH@MONASH.EDU](mailto:EDU-RESEARCH@MONASH.EDU)

**[MONASH.EDU/EDUCATION](http://MONASH.EDU/EDUCATION)**

CRICOS PROVIDER: MONASH UNIVERSITY 00008C