



The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey 2021 Data



INSTITUTE FOR
POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY
& EDUCATION

Executive Summary

The **Australian Principal Occupational Health & Wellbeing Survey** involves principals, assistant principals, and deputy principals from every school sector, state, and territory. It commenced in 2011 and is the longest-running survey of its type. It is one of the most comprehensive longitudinal data sets of school leader health and wellbeing in the world.

The survey captures three types of information drawn from existing research instruments:

- Comprehensive school demographic items;
- Personal demographic and historical information;
- Quality of life and psychosocial coping measures.

We analyse variation in school leaders' occupational health, safety, and wellbeing. We analyse these across geolocation, school type, school sector, and personal attributes.

In 2021, 2,590 participants took part in the survey, with a gender breakdown of female (53.5%), male (34.4%) and preferred not to say (12.1%). Principals made up 72% of participants, 17.6% were deputy principals, and 10.3% were other school leaders (e.g., headteacher).

The technical report details further scale breakdowns.

Some Welcomed Insights

Australian school leaders exhibited many strengths during 2021. Extended COVID-19 lockdowns required open and continuous communication from school leaders. Principals increased their accessibility to families. They provided critical support to students, staff, parents, and their communities. 82% of school leaders reported **increased parent/carer engagement** in 2021 compared to pre-pandemic years.

The pandemic resulted in greater public recognition of school principals. Schools and communities thrive when they work together. Moving instruction to at-home learning presented challenges for everyone, especially school leaders. Through the uncertainty and change, principals continued to lead, guide and support their school communities.

School leaders continued to report high satisfaction with **Meaning of Work, Commitment to the Workplace, and Self-efficacy**. Support from professional colleagues continued to increase. **Social Support from External Colleagues** is at its highest since the survey began. Taken together, these suggest school leaders coped better than expected. This is particularly encouraging, given the challenge of the pandemic.

Some Ongoing Concerns

In spite of these findings, principals' rates of psychological ill-health remain a concern. School leaders worked an average of 55.6 hours a week in 2021, more than the standard 40-hour workweek. In 2021, 62.4% of school leaders reported partial and/or complete school closures, an increase of 36.3% from 2020 (26.1%). With COVID-19 still causing challenges, our concern is how long they can sustain this.

Burnout and Cognitive Stress were the highest since this survey commenced. We know that principals' work is busy, but the scale of the pandemic and other challenges increased it. 29% of school leaders received a red flag email alerting them of their risk to at least one of **Quality of Life, Occupational Health, and Self-harm**.

The value of professional support for principals is well known. The findings from this year's report highlight an emerging trend in younger and less-experienced principals. They reported higher levels of stress from

Work Demands and much greater negative **Health and Wellbeing** results than those of experienced principals. It also seems different for female school leaders. They reported higher results for **Demands at Work**. We need to understand what contributes to these differences.

Recommendations

The resilience and dedication of Australian school leaders is encouraging. Nonetheless, underlying causes of ongoing stresses remain. The renewed appreciation for school leaders which emerged through COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity to redress these concerns. The 2021 results show that we need to:

1. Support school leaders by reshaping work practices, role demands, and targeting professional learning.

- The number one stress is the sheer quantity of work. Qualitative comments reported concerns about increasing bureaucratic and compliance work. There is frustration with administrative work that does not improve student learning. We need a national conversation with system and school leaders to develop comprehensive reform of the role.
- Teacher shortages are now at their highest rank as a source of stress since the survey commenced. Cooperative system planning across all sectors can redress these shortages.
- There are significant differences in levels of **Burnout**, Stress, and Job Satisfaction between inexperienced and experienced principals. Associations and governments can provide more targeted principal preparation and early career support.
- Female school leaders reported higher results than male school leaders for all five COPSOQ **Demands at Work** subscales. This trend may result in more female principals experiencing higher levels of Stress and Burnout. We need further research to understand these differences and their causes.

2. Create a shared dialogue to address bullying and violence.

- It is good there were minor declines in adult-on-adult bullying, threats of violence, and actual violence. Nonetheless, these remain **too high**, and far more than that experienced by the general population. Government policies to support principals are only part of the solution. Some wider community members need to change personal and online behaviour towards principal.
- 84% of Australian school leaders reported at least one form Offensive Behaviour.

Next Steps

2022 is the year we need a broader national conversation about these findings. School leaders told us their concerns. We now need collective action to investigate and change the causes. Positive learning communities need healthy principals. We need further research to investigate improving and sustaining school leaders' wellbeing. We need safe school communities that treat principals with professional respect.

The challenge of leading schools through COVID will subside. The crisis will ease. Schools have changed because of the pandemic, and it is time to do the same with the work of our school leaders.

"I will be pleased when we are managing to live with COVID without such an impact on students, schools and communities. It has been challenging to navigate this remote learning climate to the satisfaction of all parties, maintaining equity of access and providing support for all who need it."

Female, government primary school, NSW

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