

# Australian Principals Federation



## President's Message – Tina King

As the term nears end, many are awaiting with bated breath for the end of term bell to ring. In this edition of our newsletter we focus on the conversations which continue centre around school leaders – the highs, the lows, the challenges and the subsequent leadership crisis.

Much has been spoken about the teacher shortages but the pressures burdening our school leaders continue to be spoken about, however, no decisive actions and tangible solutions have been forthcoming. It is for this reason, five key Victorian organisations met last Friday to convene and Education Summit to discuss the challenges school leaders face today.

Facilitated by CEP, PASS, VASSP, VPA and APF, the work throughout the day was to discuss and develop a collective position, including possible solutions, to present to the broader education community for consideration and subsequent action. This was indeed a historic gathering and we will continue to undertake collective work and action in order to address the matters adversely impacting on not only our current school leaders but future aspirants. A copy of the press release is included in the newsletter for your reference and we look forward to sharing the positioning paper with our members and wider educational sector early next term.

I have also included in this issue key statements and findings from the recently released 2023 Australian Principal Occupational Health and Wellbeing Survey. The attached article, published in [The Conversation](#) and reproduced for your convenience, succinctly identifies the key pressure points faced by school leaders. We know these stressors to be true as they align strongly with what members are telling us and continually seeking support with.



The worrying trends of the survey findings reflect an unhealth society and the ever increasing burdens placed upon schools. There is no doubt that it is becoming incumbent upon schools to address societal problems. Whilst schools have a role to play in nurturing and developing children to grow up to be functional members and contributors in society, it is unrealistic and improbable to expect schools to be tasked with fixing problems in society.

It is without question that the survey results are alarming and disconcerting. Consistent feedback from school leaders is that their workload has reached unsustainable levels and this has created significant costs and risks on the schooling system that will continue to increase under current operating conditions. Leaders cannot continue to be expected to keep doing what they are doing as it is taking a huge toll. As I was recently quoted in one media outlet:

*It simply cannot continue to all fall on the desk of the principal."*

[The Educator](#)

Very best wishes for the upcoming holiday break and we look forward to sharing the work and considered actions as a result of the combined Education Summit.

Best regards

*T. King*



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APF Website

<https://apf.net.au>

**The Union exclusively for the Principal Class**

## Reimagining the Principalship

Sixty experienced school leaders from across Victoria came together on Friday 17 March 2023 to discuss the challenges they face daily in an increasingly complex world.

Facilitated by VASSP, VPA, PASS, CEP and APF, the work throughout the day was to discuss and develop a collective position, including possible solutions, to present to the broader education community underlining:

- what the core functions of schools are and what they should be responsible for
- what the role of a contemporary school leader comprises
- the resources schools require to achieve this
- evidence which demonstrates the unrelenting work expectations

Over the coming weeks, this position will be refined prior to release to our collective members and the broader education community early Term 2, 2023.

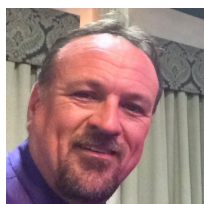
APF President, Tina King

CEP SEP, Mark McLay

PASS President, Cameron Peverett

VASSP President, Colin Axup

VPA President, Andrew Dalglish



## Support for dealing with complaints

In a recent newsletter, we shared with members avenues for support when dealing with parental complaints. The official complaint avenues in the Department were listed, however omitted mentioning the [Independent Office for School Dispute Resolution](#) (IOSDR) which is an independent but related support avenue for the benefit our members to access.

The Office was established to help resolve escalated complex disputes however they have recently established a **Conflict Coaching** program. The Office can be called if a Principal is dealing with a challenging parent issue that is not a formal complaint, but is causing stress or concern and the Principal fears it may escalate. There might be long running low level friction that appears to be growing, for example, or fall out from an incident that has triggered what appears to be a pattern of more negative interactions. The Office is happy to be a confidential sounding board, a coach for and source of strategies based on their experience with the most severe complaints and difficult situations with parents that are faced by Principals.

If you would like to access this support, please contact the IOSDR on **03 7022 1199** or via email at [school.resolution@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:school.resolution@edumail.vic.gov.au)



### Managing Disruptive Relationships

**Conflict itself isn't necessarily a problem. The real problem is what mismanaged conflict does to relationships. Most workers have experienced the tension of working with a disruptive top performer, a disorderly peer, or a disagreeable boss. The real problem is that behaviour is not considered a part of performance, therefore it is often justified instead of corrected. The behaviour allowed then becomes the standard.**

**Make behaviour part of performance.**

If a high performer can't get along with the team, that's a performance issue. If three people quit because of someone's temper, that's a performance issue. Behaviour is part of performance. This cultural shift won't happen without top leaders making a tough decision that's written into policy. Once the announcement has been made to the entire organization it's important to initiate a difficult conversation with employees who have behavioural issues.

(Continue in column on P4)

# School principals are reaching crisis point, pushed to the edge by mounting workloads, teacher shortages and abuse



**Paul Kidson**  
Senior Lecturer in Educational Leadership, Australian Catholic University



**Herb Marsh**  
Distinguished Professor of educational psychology, Australian Catholic University



**Theresa Dicke**  
Associate professor, Australian Catholic University

## The Conversation, 20th March 2023,

Australian schools have been under huge pressures in recent years. On top of concerns about [academic progress](#) and [staff shortages](#), schools have faced significant, ongoing disruptions due to COVID and major flooding disasters.

In response, there has been considerable attention rightly given to students, families and classroom teachers. But what about the people tasked with leading their schools through these unprecedented times? We have been surveying Australian principals and other school leaders – such as deputy principals and assistant principals – for more than a decade.

Previous reports from this project have highlighted ongoing challenges for school leaders, even during the [first difficult year of COVID](#). But while there are some consistent themes, this year's report shows there has been a significant, worrying shift.

The situation is more serious and pressing than previously reported: many Australian principals are on the verge of a crisis.

### Our research

Our survey has collected data every year [since 2011](#) and is now the most significant and longest-running survey of its type in the world.

Each year we have been able to survey around 2,000 school leaders about what is happening in their jobs. This includes tracking their health and wellbeing.

To date, the project has collected data from over 7,100 individual school leaders across government, independent and Catholic schools, all around the country. Given there are around 10,000 schools across Australia, this is a major source of evidence.

Three major findings stand out from the 2022 report.

### 1. Sources of stress are changing and growing

Each year, participants rate 19 sources of stress on a scale of one (not stressful) to ten (extremely stressful). We then rank all 19 based on the average score for each stressor.

Unsurprisingly, sheer workload and lack of time to focus on teaching and learning have been the two top stressors every year.

This year, however, the impact of teacher shortages has risen from a ranking of 12 in 2021 to three in 2022. On top of this, and for the first time, supporting the mental health of students and teachers combined to make the top five.

The average scores also continue to increase to the highest levels we have seen. For example, in 2021, student mental health scored an average of 7.0. In 2022 its average was 7.3. Teacher mental health rose from an average of 6.7 to 7.2.

For the first time in the history of the survey, there are seven sources of stress with an average score higher than 7.0. On top of work levels, lack of time, teacher shortages and student and teacher mental health, this includes “student-related issues” and “expectations of employers”.

Seeing so many significant stressors clustered together is new. And their cumulative impact is highly



## Support for members

We are here to support and offer advice to all members at any time.

However, from time to time you may be concerned about a colleague. Please do not hesitate in making contact with us so we can offer them appropriate support.

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concerning.

## 2. Parents are harassing and abusing principals

In trying to manage these complexities, school leaders are facing increasing levels of abuse and threatening behaviour.

Sadly, school leaders in our survey have [historically suffered](#) much higher levels of threatening and violent abuse than the general population. Prior to COVID-19, in 2019, nearly 50% of school leaders reported being threatened with violence. While this dropped to 43% during the first phases of COVID-19 (2020-2021), it now exceeds 50%.

Concerningly, school leaders reported parents as a major source of bullying and threatening behaviour.

In the 2022 survey, one third of participants report being subjected to bullying. When asked to say “from whom”, the highest result was “from parents” (19%). Conflicts and quarrels are reported by 60% of participants, mostly with parents (36%).

Gossip and slander was reported by 50% of participants, again, with most of these from parents (31%).

## 3. More principals need help

Part of our survey includes a “red flag” process. Because participants are telling us about their wellbeing, we will email them directly and confidentially if their responses suggest they should seek further professional help to protect their mental health.

These emails are intended to warn school leaders they are experiencing high stress levels and direct them to sources of support.

In 2022, an alarming 48% of school leaders received red-flag warnings. This is an enormous increase of 18% points in 2021 and the highest level since the start of the survey in 2011. Across 2017–2021, red-flag warnings averaged 29%, highlighting the significance of the 2022 result.

### What can we do about it?

Principals and school leaders have spent the past three years steering their communities through a global pandemic and in some cases, devastating flooding and bushfires.

We know the teaching workforce is under stress and many teachers are leaving or intending to leave. We also know families and communities have been stressed and stretched by the pandemic and what this has meant for their work and home lives.

But we cannot forget school principals in our responses. Our research shows they are enduring more and different stressors on top of already huge workloads. But they are not getting the support they need, rather, in too many cases, they are enduring abuse and bullying from parents.

Our red flag process shows this is taking a highly concerning toll on the health and wellbeing of school leaders, just when we need them most.

This year’s survey results show, more than ever, school leaders need urgent and significant support.

Federal and state governments have recently responded to teacher shortages with a [National Teacher Workforce Action Plan](#). It’s an important start, but our report shows the problem will compound if comparable strategies are not also developed for school leaders.

We now call on governments to specifically address the health and wellbeing of Australian school principals. We cannot achieve anything meaningful in education if our school leaders are not better supported to do their work, which is so critical to keeping teachers, students and school communities happy, safe and engaged.

### Footnote re National Teacher Workforce Action Plan

The APF and SASSLA (South Australian State School Leaders Association) submitted a joint statement in response to the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan that stressed the need to not only focus on teacher shortages but also principal shortages. The submission is available for your viewing on our website



### Define the purpose of the group.

Before you start a group, define the purpose of the group. Getting crystal clear about the purpose of the group makes it easy to course-correct sooner rather than later. The best time to define the purpose is at the beginning. The second-best time is when you find yourself feeling disturbed at the direction of the conversations.

### Set boundaries.

If you lead an organization where there’s unwanted turnover in a particular department, look first at the manager’s disposition and behaviour. If a leader or manager is worth saving, get them the support they need to shift behaviour. Set a boundary. What will you no longer tolerate? What kind of behaviour or resolution will you ask for? Setting boundaries is difficult especially when the other person has more authority or power than you.

Where there’s unresolved conflict, there’s also dysfunctional relationships. Where there’s dysfunctional relationships there’s unwanted outcomes. With the right support and tools, conflict offers an opportunity to increase communication, clarity, and connection.

*Acknowledgement: Marlene Chism in Smartbrief: “Disrupting Disruptive Behaviour” March 6, 2023*

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