

# School Leader Wellbeing

## POSITION PAPER

September 2019



Supporting State School Leaders Since 1966  
Queensland Association of State School Principals

### Rationale

Quality school leaders are critical to ensure that every child receives the best possible primary school education, regardless of where they live, their socioeconomic status or the school they attend.

As education expert Michael Fullan writes: *'The principal is the nerve centre of school improvement. When principal leadership is strong even the most challenged schools thrive.'* For this reason, effective leader induction, mentoring, capability development and support at all career stages is needed to ensure viable career pathways for Australia's educational leaders.

This position paper has been developed in response to increasingly widespread concerns that the high levels of complexity and workload demands of school leadership roles are impacting significantly on the health and wellbeing of Australian school leaders. There is a flow on effect to staff and students. It is also worth noting that this issue is not limited to Australia.

School leaders around Australia have completed *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey* conducted annually over the past eight years. Associate Professor Philip Riley's work tells us that there is a way forward that will require state and federal governments to work together.

The latest survey report indicates:

- Australian school principals work on average 53.5 hours/week (11.1% above the International Labour Organisation safe limit of 48 hours/week).
- 53% of respondents work upwards of 51 to 56 hours/week.
- Approximately 40% work upwards of 25 hours/week in school holidays.
- Job demands have remained very high (now 1.5 times that of the general population) during the last eight years.
- With respect to sources of stress, there have been large increases in mental health issues of staff and students, as well as increasing concerns reported by school leaders.
- Negative trends include increases in offensive behaviour rates, decreasing social support, and decreasing social capital. Actual occupational physical violence against school leaders is also rising, with over one in three reporting assaults. This is 9.3 times the rate at which the general population experiences violence.
- Health and wellbeing outcomes indicate self-rated health is in decline over time. This score has been shown in numerous studies to accurately predict long-term health outcomes, including mortality, cardiovascular diseases, hospitalisations, use of medicine, work absences, and early retirement.

The results of this survey combined with overwhelming and increasing evidence from school leaders, QASSP Service Officers and members of QASSP Management Committee highlight the significance of this issue for all Queensland primary school leaders.

## The Challenge

- Associate Professor Riley's longitudinal survey has identified several recommendations which require government and employer action in a number of key areas.
- While QASSP will continue to advocate for positive and proactive strategies for state primary school leaders in Queensland to urgently address school leader wellbeing issues, external commitment to significant action is also required.
- QASSP will also continue to engage in the national advocacy campaign to highlight concerns about school leader wellbeing, and to work collaboratively with other jurisdictions and associations to provide positive strategies to address health and wellbeing issues.

## The Opportunity

QASSP believes that much more can be achieved to improve school leader wellbeing through focussed and collaborative effort. QASSP believes there should be a government/system funded campaign relating to valuing and respecting schools, and educational professionals, particularly school leaders. Such a broad community-based strategy would underpin a range of activities to improve school leader wellbeing.

These activities could include:

- Increased access to quality professional counselling for school leaders following critical incidents and/or traumatic events.
- Identifying characteristics and profiles and gathering data relating to schools experiencing a high incidence of critical incidents and/or traumatic events. (For example, 'Hot Spot' schools.) This data could also be used to identify and provide additional resources to address key aspects of concern.
- Provision of a suite of options for longer term improvement in school leader wellbeing and productivity, which may include health improvement options, sabbaticals, funded study tours, paid study leave, professional development allowances, reciprocal work shadowing and permanent part-time opportunities.

Workload is an ongoing and complex issue for school leaders which continues to have a significant negative impact on school leaders' wellbeing. Employers including the Department of Education Queensland must take the moral choice to:

- reduce job demands
- and/or increase resources to cope with increased demands.

This will help to increase the level of social capital in schools.

QASSP believes that it is timely to review the position description of the principal. Steps should include:

- Identify the requirements of the role through the lens of the 21st century.
- Re-evaluate the range and complexity of areas and tasks of responsibility, including instructional leadership.
- Set realistic delegation levels in keeping with the work of a school in the 21st century to allow the principal to be the instructional leader.
- Provide appropriate levels and amounts of administrative support to allow the principal to complete their real work as outlined in the revised position description

## Recommendations

QASSP believes that a collaborative effort to realise the following recommendations will improve school leader wellbeing:

- Full and immediate implementation of the recommendations of *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey Report 2018*.
- Implementation of scheduled formal debriefing sessions for school leaders, as is the case for other care professionals.
- Development of a wellbeing strategy blueprint that meets the needs of school leaders across Queensland, shaped by significant contributions by QASSP, as the professional association that represents state primary school principals and school leadership teams in Queensland.
- Funding support that would allow QASSP to employ two FTE Service Officers (the Association currently employs two part-time Service Officers).
- Immediate commencement of the process to identify and provide additional support and resourcing for schools experiencing a high incidence of critical incidents and/or traumatic events. The special needs of rural and remote school leaders must be considered as part of this process.
- A review of the position description of principal, to truly reflect the work of the role in a 21st century school.
- Deployment of a positive broad-based community awareness campaign to value and respect educational professionals.
- Urgent development of a proactive program to enhance long-term school leader wellbeing, with a suite of options that might include:
  - health improvement opportunities (for example, gym membership, mindfulness courses, etcetera)
  - sabbatical leave
  - keeping in touch days.

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## Appendix 1 |

### Background

#### **Annual International Symposium on the Role of Professional Associations for School Leaders**

In November 2016, representatives from over 32 educational jurisdictions across the globe took part in the third Annual International Symposium on the Role of Professional Associations for School Leaders. Held in Toronto, Canada the theme was 'Principal Work-Life Balance and Well-Being Matter'. The White Paper which resulted from this gathering argues that the issue of leader wellbeing, 'without urgent policy and practice intervention, will impact school and system-level outcomes for generations.' In fact, the paper sounds a stark warning for all involved in education, declaring that there is a 'crisis in principal well-being on a global scale'.

The White Paper identifies the escalation in workload as 'principal work intensification – a phenomenon defined by an increasing volume and complexity of school leaders' work, roles and responsibilities'. The report indicates that work intensification hinders the development of a healthy work-life balance, 'with significant implications for principal well-being and subsequently the well-being of schools and school systems'.

#### **The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey**

The survey is a longitudinal study conducted by Associate Professor Philip Riley and a team from the Australian Catholic University. The survey instrument is confidential and independent of all employer groups, professional associations and unions. Consecutive iterations have revealed that rising administrative workloads and responsibilities have had a significant impact on school leader wellbeing. Dr Riley's study also signals that the incidence of threats of violence towards school leaders is extremely high and rising.

### The Current Situation

QASSP has closely engaged with Associate Professor Riley to gather evidence on, and advocate for, strategies to address the current status of school leader wellbeing both nationally and in Queensland. Dr Riley's presentation to QASSP State Council in June 2017 not only highlighted the growing concerns and evidence, but also recommended strategies to address these issues.

Since May 2018, QASSP has employed a second part-time Service Officer to support school leaders across the state. In June 2017 and also in August 2019, QASSP conducted two-day training courses for the Association's 50 Branch Service Officers.

QASSP's two Service Officers hold ongoing discussions with staff at Headspace, engaged by the Department of Education to provide a counselling service to principals and deputy principals.

Additionally, QASSP has engaged Dr Adam Fraser to work with several groups of school leaders to conduct The Flourish Movement professional learning, using a combined branches approach.

However, in line with Dr Riley's evidence, QASSP members continue to report concerns for school leaders in a wide range of school settings across the state, including those where traumatic events are

experienced on a regular basis. As well, members have reported an increase in occupational violence through offensive behaviour such as verbal and/or physical abuse and an increase in the denigration of school leaders and other educators, on social media platforms. These, and many similar reports, highlight the growing concern relating to the lack of valuing and respect for all educators in general and in particular, for school leaders.

## References

Ontario Principals Council 2019, Symposium White Paper: Principal Work-life Balance and Well-being Matter (online). <https://www.principals.ca/en/professional-learning/resources/Documents/FINAL-PrincipalWellBeing-17-ExecSummary.pdf> [accessed 23 February 2019].

Riley, P. 2019, *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey Report 2018 Data*, Australian Catholic University, Victoria.



## Appendix 2 |

### **A Non Exhaustive List of Issues Managed by QASSP Service Officers in Support of School Leaders**

#### **OCCUPATIONAL VIOLENCE**

- verbal abuse
- physical abuse
- threats of violence
- threats of legal action.

#### **DEATHS including SUICIDES**

- students, staff, and members of the wider school community.

#### **TRAUMA relating to**

- critical incidents
- natural disasters and recovery
- life threatening student medical issues.

#### **LEGAL**

- suspensions and investigations by the Integrity and Employee Relations Unit
- promotional process dissatisfaction
- Work Cover Claims
- grievances including employee to employee, and parent to school.

#### **HEALTH and WELLBEING**

- mental health
- physical health
- domestic violence
- work/life balance
- self-care.

#### **SUPERVISOR RELATIONSHIPS**

- supporting members to manage upwards.

#### **STUDENTS**

- managing complex cases and challenging students.

#### **PARENT and COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS**

- managing unrealistic community expectations
- managing relationships with families
- managing social media attacks – school and personal.

#### **WORKLOAD**

- struggling with the competing priorities of teaching and administration
- managing increasing systemic demands and accountabilities
- managing enrolment growth or loss
- change management.