



Principals face more violence

Jonathan Carson

School principals are six times more likely to face violence than the general population with students and parents dishing it out equally, according to new research in Australia.

And with more than 50 assaults on Waikato school staff last year, the situation is likely to be just as serious here, New Zealand Principals' Association president Phil Harding says.

The study by Monash University in Melbourne, released this week, found principals were more likely to face violence, threats of violence and bullying than the general population.

They were also working longer hours and experiencing higher levels of stress, the report said.

More than 2000 principals were surveyed and 38 per cent said they had experienced threats of violence compared with 8 per cent of the general population, while 27 per cent reported experiencing physical violence, compared with just 4 per cent of the general population.

Parents made more threats than students, but they were equally likely to be the perpetrators of violence.

There were 54 stand-downs from Waikato schools for assaults on staff last year, and in 15 cases the offending was serious enough for the students to be removed permanently. There were also 263 stand-downs for verbal assaults on staff. However, these figures don't account for incidences of parents assaulting or threatening school staff.

Mr Harding said the situation in New Zealand schools would not be "hugely different" to those across the ditch and principals were often the target of students' and parents' anger. "I think, probably, there is a bit of a trend towards people taking it out on the school and blaming the school when things go wrong."

He said a Wellington principal was recently badly assaulted by a student's family member during a meeting to discuss the student's behavioural issues. "You'd think as we get more sophisticated and as we move into the future that tribal violence would be reducing and not increasing, and yet we do hear of these horrible attacks sometimes in a school, but also in public places and you just think, what is wrong?"

Hillcrest High School principal Kelvin Whiting said that in 30 years of working in education he had not been threatened, but he has had to break up fights on occasion. "In terms of assaults on staff that's certainly, in my experience, a rarity," he said. "I certainly feel safe and comfortable in my school environment."

Mr Whiting said the Secondary Principals' Association was undertaking a similar survey of principals in New Zealand.

jonathan.carson@waikatotimes.co.nz