

Rising load emerges as a principal concern

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Mending fences, health and safety issues, dealing with tradesmen: they're all in a day's work for Judith Crowe, principal of Melbourne Girls' College in Richmond. *Photo: Eddie Jim*

Violence threat to school heads

INSPECTING roof gutters, peering into clogged drains, haggling with painters for their lowest price. These are not the sort of chores school principals are expected to spend a lot of time on.

But as the trend towards greater school autonomy takes hold nationwide, principals are taking responsibility for tasks previously managed by a central education bureaucracy.

Judith Crowe is principal of Melbourne Girls' College, a government high school in Richmond. On Christmas Day last year she spent the morning fixing temporary fencing on the school's boundary after being told the fence had fallen onto a public bike path.

At weekends during school term she cleans up litter or lost belongings left by people who hire the school's gym and other facilities.

"I can think of better uses of my time than making sure everybody has got desks and dealing with occupational health and safety problems such as water on the floor in the toilets," says Ms Crowe, whose school of 1254 students has one part-time maintenance worker.

The school recently advertised for an arts teacher and received 70 applications. Ms Crowe took the applications home and spent evenings compiling a shortlist.

"We don't have a personnel unit, unlike most organisations with more than 100 staff," she says. "By contrast, if one of my staff applies for a position at a private school and I'm a referee, it will be the school's personnel unit who will ring me and do the initial checking of the application.

"Here, there's no one to delegate to. The office staff and the assistant principals are all very busy too."

Much of her school day is taken up with administrative tasks rather than the education issues she would prefer to focus on.

Many colleagues around Australia are in the same boat, according to interim findings of an annual survey of 2005 school leaders.

The Australian Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey, conducted by Monash University, is the first longitudinal independent project to measure the wellbeing of principals in government, Catholic and independent schools.

It found principals are reeling from the stress of taking on extra responsibilities without support.

Principals in all school systems named the volume and growing complexity of their work and a lack of time to focus on teaching and student learning as the two biggest causes of work-related stress.



Fairhills High School principal Harvey Wood.

More than a quarter of principals work more than 61 hours a week, the survey found. Eighty per cent spend more than 46 hours at work.

School holidays don't bring much respite. More than half the survey respondents worked more than 25 hours a week during vacations.

Principals in independent schools had lower stress levels than their peers in government, regional and remote schools. Ninety per cent of government school principals rated workload as a main cause of stress, compared with a third of independent school leaders.

Heads of small government and non-government schools in rural areas also had high stress levels caused by heavy workloads.

Underperforming staff was another main cause of stress.

"In government schools especially, principals are very limited in who they can hire and fire," says the survey's author, Dr Philip Riley, of the university's education faculty. "I've heard horror stories of principals dealing with teachers who should not be in the system but it's taken them five years to move the teacher on."

He says every principal's job has been radically expanded by government policies pursuing more rigorous school accountability and the devolving of administrative tasks from central office to local school control.

"Principals are increasingly being held to account over their output, by such things as NAPLAN testing, without having much control over the input into their schools and whether they have real autonomy.

"What's coming out of the survey results is evidence of the two-tier system that everybody is complaining about.

"In the independent system, principals seem to have more autonomy to make the sorts of decisions to enable them to focus more on teaching and learning."

Victoria is at the forefront of the devolution trend.

It has had a self-managing school system for 15 years, with government schools able to select their own teachers and decide how their school budgets are spent.

Nationally, all state and territory education ministers are considering a federal government plan to give principals and school councils more autonomy. The federal initiative is based on student performance research from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, showing schools with more control over their finances and staff selection have better student results.

Frank Sal, president of the Victorian Association of Secondary School Principals, says the Monash survey's findings reinforce what public schools have been telling the Victorian government for many years: school autonomy has proved to be a double-edged sword.

Principals like having control over their school's finances, staff and facilities, but they have not been given more money to cover the extra tasks of managing budget spending, buildings and the hiring of staff and tradesmen.

"Autonomy has given us more responsibility and workload without the accompanying authority and resources to adequately meet all aspects of the new roles," Mr Sal says, adding that the profession is waiting for the Baillieu government to fulfil an election pledge to ease workloads.

At Fairhills High School, in Ferntree Gully, on Melbourne's south-eastern fringe, Harvey Wood is dealing with the worst workloads he has experienced in 27 years of running schools.

His school, like many others, has a large portion of highly experienced staff, most at the top of the pay scale. That means Fairhills spends about 90 per cent of its budget from the state government on teacher salaries. The rest is spent on student education materials, office administration, cleaning, repairs and electricity and other utilities.

Mr Wood says: "The Education Department would say there's nothing to stop me from employing a personal assistant or a facilities manager to deal with all the tradesmen coming into the school. But when you've got a very tight budget it means the assistant principals and the principal end up doing these jobs.

"It would be fantastic to have a full-time facilities manager who knows what to look for and where to go to get good tradesmen. When I talk to principals who have full-time facilities managers, personal assistants and school psychologists, they say it's really changed their lives."

High levels of violence are also taking a toll on school leaders, the survey found. Principals are exposed to six times the incidence of physical violence at work than faced in many other professions and nearly five times the incidence of threats of violence. Those most likely to be victims of violence or to witness violence are government secondary school principals working in large towns or rural areas.

For Mr Wood, violent incidents have been rare, but he says most incidents in schools tend to be caused by aggressive parents, rather than students or fellow staff.

He is not surprised by the survey findings and says they reflect the difficulties of being a parent in an increasingly complex society. "Parents get frustrated: they expect schools to solve problems that were once solved within the home or by church. So we're copping some of that."

As the role of principal changes rapidly, the profession's demographic profile is about to be transformed. Almost 70 per cent of Australia's 10,000 principals will reach retirement age in the next five years, says Principals Australia, which represents primary and secondary school principal groups from state, Catholic and independent sectors.

Within the profession there is widespread alarm that the job's burgeoning complexity is already turning off potential leaders. The paucity of suitable applicants for advertised vacancies has become so bad, professional associations say, that even well-known, successful schools often get only six applicants for the top job.

Melbourne Girls' College's Judith Crowe has adult children and works 60 to 70 hours a week. "I've got the best job in the world; it's fantastic to be part of the education of young people who are so positive, so much fun," says Ms Crowe, whose comments reflect a broad consensus from the survey, showing principals have high levels of commitment.

Overall the survey shows principals are generally positive about their jobs, with only 6 per cent often feeling depressed about their work.

"The joys of the job need to be promoted so we can attract people to the profession," Ms Crowe says. "But I don't know whether the next generation will work these very long hours, because they've been brought up in a different way — they're more conscious of having a healthy work/life balance.

"The job should be compatible with having a family life, but unfortunately it's got to the point where it no longer is."

Dr Riley says the workplace changes uncovered by his survey mean it is likely the next generation of school leaders, because of youth and inexperience, will be at higher risk of stress-related health problems than their predecessors.

However, he says the looming generational changeover also represents a chance for governments to renew schools.

"If changes can be made to principals' work practices that reduce the negative impacts of taking on the role, the opportunities for sustainable school improvement brought about by 'new blood' can advance the nation's schools. But it must be done now."

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