



School principals bullied and assaulted by parents

Peter Michael

SCHOOL principals are in the nation's most stressed and bullied profession – with as many as one-in-three physically attacked or a witness to violence in their workplace, a study has found.

And school holidays don't bring much respite for principals, with nearly half working 25 hours a week in vacations.

Latest findings of the nation's peak survey of Australia's 10,000 school principals show they face six times the incidence of physical violence compared to other workers.

Most attacks or threats of violence come from aggressive parents rather than students or teachers.

Suzanne Fern from Mary-

borough is now principal of St Mary's Primary School in Armidale, and admits the prospect of dealing with aggressive students and parents is a challenge.

"It is extremely high stress, but I love it," Mrs Fern said.

"I've been lucky, in my six years as principal I've only had to deal with two violent parents and two aggressive kids. But when someone is very aggressive it can be difficult to handle if, like me, you are female and not very tall."

The Australian Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey, conducted by Monash University, is finalising the latest data in the three-year longitudinal survey of 2005 school leaders.

In Cairns yesterday, study author Dr Philip Riley detailed new findings to some of the 1400 delegates attending the World Convention of the International Confederation of Principals.

Dr Riley told the conference he blamed Naplan tests, a national curriculum, and "administrivia" on the heightened anxiety of principals in state, independent and Catholic schools.

"This surveillance culture in schools, when they are tested and ranked, has led to increased bullying from parents who are asking why the school is not performing," he said.

"It has been like a strait-jacket around the school and anxiety among parents has led

to stress, bullying and violence against principals."

The two biggest causes of work-related stress were sheer workload and a lack of time to focus on teaching and student learning, the survey found.

Nearly 40 per cent reported feeling stressed or bullied compared to an 8 per cent average in the national workforce, Dr Riley said.

More than a quarter of principals work more than 61 hours a week while 80 per cent spend more than 46 hours at work.

Nearly half the principals in the nation's 10,000 schools take prescription medication for a diagnosed condition.