

School principals face threats and bullying from parents and students: survey

The World Today By Sarah Sedghi

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Assault, threats of violence and bullying are just some of the major difficulties school principals have reported they face in a nationwide survey released today.

The report found parents are behind increasingly violent threats and bullying, and one in four principals reported they have experienced physical violence carried out by their students.

Lila Mularczyk, a high school principal for 13 years, took part in the study. She said teaching can exact a heavy toll.

"I am aware of incidents where principals have been hurt physically by parents who have certainly wanted to have their voice heard and I am aware of many instances where parents have been most unhelpful in their abusive, aggressive, verbal attacks on principals," she said.

Ms Mularczyk said she had observed a variety of reasons for parents taking out their frustrations on school staff.

"They obviously want the best for their child. Many parents are not fully conversant with more appropriate ways of expressing or trying to protect their child from a perceived problem. That's one issue - I think mental health issues are increasing," she said.

"For children, I think it's unfortunate that they actually see their parents in the main, or adults, showing that type of behaviour and it's an awful role modelling situation for children to see that that is the way that you need to negotiate through an issue or a conversation."

More than 3,600 school principals and assistant principals from around Australia took part in the study undertaken by the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and Teachers Health Fund.

ACU Associate Professor Philip Riley authored the report and said parents were unfairly taking out their anxieties and frustrations on principals.

"We don't trust our institutions anymore and we have high levels of anxiety in the community based around things like NAPLAN results ... that is causing a whole lot of angst in the community and I think there are a lot of parents who are now really worried about their kids' futures and they're potentially taking it out on principals - and I would assume teachers too - although I don't have actual figures for teachers," he said.

Report unveils worrying statistics

The report found principals experience violence at work at a rate seven times higher than the general population and threats of violence against them are five times higher.

Sharon Saitlik, principal at Mont Albert Primary School in Victoria, said huge workloads were also adding to their pressure.

"We are expected to be everything to everyone. We have to deal with various administration, we've got to be technical leaders, cultural leaders, educational leaders, human leaders, and also do so in a symbolic manner, but make sure that we are the face of our schools and there's very complicated aspects of what we do at various times and it can be an



PHOTO: The report found principals experience violence at work at a rate seven times higher than the general population. (ABC News, file photo)

MAP: Australia

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We are expected to be everything to everyone.

School principle Sharon Saitlik


incredibly fulfilling job," Ms Saitlik said.

"I don't think any principal in any school is not passionate about what they do, but in saying that it does take high energy levels, huge enthusiasm, and high commitment - and does have an emotional toll on our own wellbeing and welfare."

The report has made recommendations, including the establishment of an independent body to address bullying and violence, providing more support to principals.

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