

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

One in four principals say they have experienced physical violence.

Most of that's being carried out by their students but the study also found some parents are just as bad as the unruly kids when it comes to dishing out emotional abuse.

Their encounters with principals are said to be taking a major toll on the school leaders and the study says support measures are urgently needed.

Sarah Sedghi reports.

SARAH SEDGHI: Lila Mularczyk has been the principal at Merrylands High School for 13 years and says teaching can exact a heavy toll.

LILA MULARCZYK: I am aware of incidences 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 are most unhelpful in their abusive, aggressive, verbal attacks on principals.

SARAH SEDGHI: She says there are many reasons why parents take out their frustrations on school staff.

LILA MULARCZYK: 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.

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.

SARAH SEDGHI: Lila Mularczyk is one of more than 3,600 school principals and assistant principals from all over the country to take part in a study looking at the health and wellbeing of school leadership.

The final report is based on four years worth of data, collated by the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and Teachers Health Fund, and some of its findings are startling.

For example 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.

Associate Professor Philip Riley from ACU authored the report.

PHILIP RILEY: We don't trust our institutions anymore and we have high levels of anxiety in the community based around things like Naplan results and stuff and 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.

SARAH SEDGHI: Do you think it's something that parents and students do need to take more notice of?

It wasn't that long ago that a Victorian teacher won a landmark case and was compensated for the damage the abuse by students caused him.

PHILIP RILEY: Yeah exactly. If you looked in detail at that case, there was some structural issues that could have protected him more that weren't being instigated.

SARAH SEDGHI: The report says the establishment of an independent body to address bullying and violence is one way to tackle the issue. Others include providing more support to principals.

But huge workloads are also adding to their pressure.

Sharon Saitlik has been the principal at Mont Albert Primary School in Victoria for more than a decade and also took part in the study.

SHARON SAITLIK: 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 incredible fulfilling job.

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, high commitment and does have an emotional toll on our own well-being and welfare.

NICK GRIMM: Sharon Saitlik, the principal at Mont Albert Primary School in Victoria, ending Sarah Sedghi's report.