

Violence threat to school heads

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One in three school principals has experienced or witnessed schoolyard violence in the last year, a survey has found. *Photo: Janie Barrett*

Feature: Rising load a principal concern

ONE in three of Australia's state school principals was physically attacked or witnessed physical violence in their workplace last year, a survey has found.

And most of the violence involved aggressive parents rather than students or teachers, principals told *The Age*.

In Catholic schools, one in five principals said they had been exposed to physical violence, and in independent schools the figure was one in eight.

Overall, the nation's school leaders experienced an incidence of physical assault six times higher than the general workforce, according to the interim findings of the Australian Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey.

The study's author, Dr Philip Riley of Monash University's education faculty, said he was shocked by the level of violence reported by principals.

"They told me the incidence of violence is probably worse for teachers because they're on the front line. By the time a parent has threatened a principal, they would have threatened two or three teachers," he said.

The survey of 2005 school leaders by Monash University researchers began last year and will be undertaken annually. It is the first long-term independent study to measure the well-being of principals in government, Catholic and independent schools nationwide.

Victorian Association of Secondary School Principals president Frank Sal called for a state government crackdown on the problem. He said violence against principals was common, yet they had to deal with incidents by themselves, without strong backup or legal help from the Education Department.

"Principals can get trespass orders against parents, but I don't think the department has ever taken legal action against a parent in support of a principal who has been physically assaulted," Mr Sal said.

"I've known of three people who've been hit by parents and they may or may not have received a sympathy call from their regional office. That's all."

Victoria's Minister for the Teaching Profession, Peter Hall, said reports of physical assaults were rare, with about two cases dealt with by the department each year.

The department encouraged principals to call police if they were assaulted or threatened, and it paid legal costs if a principal obtained a trespass order from the courts. "We can't take an aggressive parent to court. It's the police who lay the charges and the police as prosecutors are the ones who bear the cost of the legal action," Mr Hall said.