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SCHOOL REPORT

Principals in firing line of violence

■ **Bethany Hiatt**
Education Editor

School leaders are increasingly under attack from aggressive students and parents, a nationwide survey of principals has found.

The report on principals' health and wellbeing, to be released today, shows one in three WA principals said they were physically assaulted by a student last year, compared with the national rate of one in four.

The proportion of Australian principals threatened with violence by parents rose from 19 per cent in 2011 to 25 per cent this year and threats from students rose from 17 to 24 per cent.

Report author Philip Riley, from the Australian Catholic University, said principals were attacked physically seven times more often than the general population and had five times as many threats of violence.

WA principals reported higher rates of abuse than in NSW, Victoria, the ACT and Queensland, with 32.7 per cent assaulted last year and 41.8 per cent threatened.

More than 3600 respondents from public and private schools said their biggest sources of stress were heavy workloads and increasing prevalence of offensive behaviour.

Associate Professor Riley said high levels of anxiety about national literacy and numeracy tests and an increased focus on teacher quality might have led more people to blame teachers for poor results.

"I think our society is changing," he said. "Violence is becoming more prevalent everywhere."

"The thing that frightens me is that it's so pervasive — it's across all systems. You would think it doesn't happen in the elite private schools, but it does."

Professor Riley recommended an independent authority to find ways to protect principals.

WA Primary Principals Association president Stephen Breen said the report highlighted a pressing need for more support for school leaders, whose responsibilities had increased without extra resources.

"An increasing number of primary children are verbally or physically aggressive with other children and their teachers," he said.

"The high expectations of parents are strongly felt by school leaders, adding to their stress levels."

He said some parents involved themselves in school incidents, seeking investigations and sometimes compensation for what would normally be a minor incident.