REIMAGINING THE PRINCIPALSHIP: ADDRESSING WORKLOAD AND WELLBEING IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

AMANDA MCKAY

Amanda McKay examines both the overwhelming workload as well as the declining wellbeing of principals. She explains the causes of this situation and the need for it to change...

The role of a school principal has been described by AITSL (2014) as "one of the most exciting and significant undertaken by any person in our society".

Behind this inspiring sentiment, though, lies a reality that is increasingly unsustainable for those who are working as school leaders today. The annual Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Survey paints a stark picture, with escalating workloads, rising mental health concerns, and a growing number of principals contemplating leaving the profession (Dicke et al., 2025). This article explores the systemic pressures facing school leaders as well as the emotional aspects of principals' work, and calls for urgent reform to support a more sustainable version of leadership in Australian schools.

THE PRINCIPALSHIP IN CRISIS

The annual wellbeing survey reveals a troubling trend: over half of respondents from New South Wales have experienced threats of violence, and 51% are seriously considering leaving their roles (Dicke et al., 2025). These statistics reflect data from this survey showing a decade-long deterioration in working conditions and the wellbeing of Australian school leaders. Despite repeated outpourings of concern from the media and policymakers each year when the survey results are released, little has changed. Principals are expected to deliver 'relentless' school improvement while navigating funding constraints, staff shortages, and rising wellbeing concerns among students and staff. The emotional and relational burden of leading communities through complex times has become overwhelming, with many principals reporting feeling stretched to breaking point, and fewer educators looking to step into leadership roles.

AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

The promise of autonomy, particularly through policies like *Local Schools, Local Decisions*, is ostensibly intended to empower school leaders. In practice, however, it has often resulted in increased administrative burdens and fragmented responsibilities. Principals, in research I conducted in partnership with the Australian Secondary Principals' Association, described finding themselves overseeing bus contracts, asbestos issues, and managing financial risk - tasks far removed from instructional leadership. Our findings highlighted the disconnect between policy rhetoric and reality. Principals in our study described autonomy as "an illusion," constrained by systemic red tape and prescriptive accountability measures. The result for many principals has been a shift away from the core business of educational leadership and leading teaching and learning, towards the operational management of schools. According to Eacott et al. (2023), OECD data from 2018 (showed that almost 90% of Australian school leaders' time is spent on non-instructional matters, and this rise in workload makes it difficult for leaders to prioritise teaching and learning matters. This erosion of time for teaching and learning undermines the fundamental purpose of educational leadership.

VALUES, DEMORALISATION, AND MARKETISATION

Beyond workload, principals face a deeper challenge: the misalignment between their professional values and the demands of a marketised education system. Increased competition among public schools for enrolments and funding has damaged collaboration and community. Doris Santoro's (2018) concept of "demoralisation" captures the experience of educators whose work no longer aligns with their core beliefs. Principals are not immune to this, as the pressure to meet narrow metrics of success (often defined by external data) has reshaped what it means to be a "good" school leader. This shift naturally affects relationships within and across schools. Strong networks and collegial support are essential for helping principals to navigate the emotional load of leadership, but marketisation and devolution can undermine these connections. Principals report feelings of isolation, exacerbated by the lack of systemic

support felt by many leaders in highly devolved systems.

THE EMOTIONAL LABOUR OF LEADERSHIP

Leading a school is not just intellectually demanding, it carries a significant and often-hidden emotional element. A review of the literature on the emotional and relational intensity of the principalship conducted with my colleagues Fiona Longmuir and Katrina MacDonald highlighted the undervalued emotional labour of principals, which directly impacts their health and wellbeing (McKay et al., 2025). For example, in Victoria, principals are 55% more likely to report mental health injuries than other school staff (Victorian Department of Education, 2017). The emotional bandwidth required to lead effectively often spills into principals' personal lives, affecting their relationships and family dynamics. In a research project focused on attracting and retaining principals within the profession, participants described strained relationships, missed time with children, and a pervasive sense that school dominates everything (McKay & Mills, 2023). Principals have described feeling the need to work around the clock to meet demands, leaving little room for rest or recovery. One participant described the challenge of "trying not to let the urgent hijack the important", which they experience as a daily struggle in a system that normalises working in crisis mode.

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP

Despite these challenges, there are glimmers of hope around the country. In South Australia, a shift in educational priorities has signalled a move toward more supportive systems for students and educators alike. In New South Wales, the NSW Teachers Federation 2025 Annual Conference expressed a clear commitment to rebuilding and strengthening public education. Part of the strength of that public education system must include having a sustainable workforce, and relationships remain central to sustaining school leaders in their work.

I was recently part of a team undertaking an evaluation of a group supervision model in Victoria that fostered trust and created a space where principals felt supported to share vulnerabilities and concerns, and to celebrate each other's successes. Participants described it as a "lifeline," enabling them to build supportive networks that extended beyond formal meetings, which helped reduce isolation and sustained participants through difficult times.

Importantly, my previous research has shown that these types of networks can also help principals to establish boundaries around their own work. Rituals such as end-of-day debriefs with colleagues or shared commitments to leave school at a specific time and debrief on the way home with colleagues from other schools has created space for recovery and enabled leaders to place some distance between their work and their 'outside of school' lives. These practices appear to be simple on the surface, but they reflect a deeper shift in mindset and a commitment to actions that recognise wellbeing as being essential to sustaining leaders within the profession. They also require principals to draw a line under the day, which is far easier said than done, and more experienced principals seemed to be more comfortable with taking this approach towards the end of their workdays. This is an example where individualised solutions can be risky for leaders, and systemic reform is needed so that the sole responsibility isn't on a school leader to determine how much is 'enough' when their workloads can seemingly be all-encompassing.

REIMAGINING THE FUTURE AND A CALL TO COLLECTIVE ACTION

As New South Wales moves toward new horizons in education, the question is not just what changes will be made, but how they will be enacted. Reform fatigue is real, and many teachers view policy shifts as something done "to" them rather than "with" them. Many early career principals, in particular, may have only known a system defined by heavy accountability and competition. Reimagining leadership will require a collective voice, solidarity, and a return to purpose. We need to keep returning to a central guiding question: what are we asking schools and leaders to do, and why?

The challenges facing school leaders are systemic, not individual. Although principals continue to persevere out of a deep commitment to their communities, sustainable leadership requires systemic reform, investment in relationships, and a reimagining of what it means to lead a school. Tinkering at the edges will not sufficiently address these issues. The future of the principalship depends on collective action that is grounded in solidarity, purpose, and a commitment to sustaining a strong public education system.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda McKay is Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). She is interested in the ways education policy environments influence school leaders' identities, and their intentions to remain within the profession. Her current research projects focus on analysing workload, wellbeing, and sustainability in leaders' and teachers' careers in Australian schools and reimagining ways of working into the future.

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