Working with flexibility in independent schools.

A research collaboration between PeopleBench + Independent Schools Queensland.

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Independent Schools Queensland
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Independent schools are competing for teachers in the tightest labour market in a generation in an environment of rising staff expectations and, since June 2023, a strengthened legal obligation to genuinely consider requests for flexible work.

Despite this, flexible work practices remain in their relative infancy in education workplaces. Research on their efficacy in schools is limited, no consensus exists on what flexibility even means in a school, and the literature says almost nothing about how independent schools use it. Project Flex aims to address that gap: we conducted semi-structured interviews with leaders from 10 Queensland independent schools, ranging from a 1,800-student metropolitan grammar school, to a trade training college in North Queensland, to a virtual-hybrid campus, and a special assistance school serving a rural First Nations community. We synthesised our interview findings with a review of the existing Australian and international research.

WHAT WE FOUND

1. **The sector's best examples of flexibility are not called flexibility.** The most valued and most scalable practices found in this study were rarely labelled 'flexible work': they include fortnightly early marks, external exam invigilators, teaching loads held below industrial maximums, and no-questions-asked leave days. This mirrors the research. Most school-relevant flexibility concerns time and task design rather than location, and staff value informal, everyday flexibility as highly as formal arrangements. Most schools neither measure nor officially communicate this asset.

2. **The biggest gains come from designing flexibility in, not bolting it on.** The standout models were structural: such as a block-based curriculum that yields every teacher a full non-contact day per week as a byproduct of design, and a team teacher added to every junior-school year level, halving effective ratios and reducing sick days. Structural approaches reach large numbers of staff, not only those confident enough to ask, and they pre-empt the literature's most consistent warning, that reduced hours without reduced workload delivers little wellbeing benefit.

3. **Trust determines whether any of it works.** Across the research and every interview, culture and implementation quality (rather than policy wording) determined whether flexibility succeeded. In our sample, schools where flexibility works tend to have leaders who build trust by showing genuine interest in the wellbeing of staff, make decisions collaboratively, and establish enough psychological safety for staff to be honest about their needs.

4. **The student outcomes test is the north star.** The schools managing flexibility best filter every decision through one question: What is the impact on students? It legitimises the 'yes', dignifies the 'no', and protects the community from arrangements that suit individuals only. This is a sector-wide asset which not all industries have. The evidence supports this, since teacher wellbeing is linked to student wellbeing, while cautioning against changes which put the student experience at risk.

5. **Flexibility is a live talent-market lever.** Research from the UK shows a majority of teachers are more likely to apply to flexible-friendly schools. Hard evidence is more difficult to come by in the independent school sector, but some leaders observationally connected flexibility initiatives with sharp increases in applicant numbers for senior roles and the retention of skilled teachers who would otherwise have left the profession. With a retirement wave and an expectations wave arriving together, schools that make their flexibility visible will benefit disproportionately.

6. **Measurement is the sector's weakest muscle.** Nearly every school described its evidence as anecdotal. The exceptions show what is possible, including benchmarked survey data revealing work intensity at 15% against a 53% state average. As psychosocial obligations tighten and flexibility becomes industrially contested, schools without data will be defending their posture blind.

7. **Success relies on a thoughtful assessment of risk and opportunity.** Leaders must be deliberate to ensure compliance with their legislative obligations and duties of care, but their decisions must also reflect a deep understanding of workload and the interconnected nature of work in schools, so that well-intended changes don't create unintended negative consequences for other roles.

This paper proposes that flexibility at its most beneficial is not a policy or a set of individual arrangements; it is a property of the whole workplace.

Independent schools are well-placed to take advantage of these benefits. The schools furthest ahead in our sample did not wait for a proven model, they asked *'why wouldn't we?'*, assessed the possible implications for the student experience, involved their staff in the implementation, evaluated their impact progressively, and kept what worked.

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

The project

This paper is the primary output of *Project Flex: Working with Flexibility in Independent Schools*, a research collaboration between PeopleBench and Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ). PeopleBench's State of the Independent School Workforce study (2025) found flexibility to be one of the aspects of the independent school employee value proposition least likely to meet staff expectations. Project Flex set out to understand that gap, documenting how independent schools define, practise and govern workplace flexibility so leaders can make better-informed decisions as education workplaces continue to evolve.

Our approach

The paper draws on two complementary strands of evidence.

A review of existing research and practice. We synthesised Australian and international literature on flexible work in schools and comparable industries (e.g. healthcare), including systematic reviews and government-commissioned studies from the UK and Australia.

Structured interviews with 10 Queensland independent schools. Between June and August 2026 we interviewed principals, HR leaders and other senior leaders from schools who were selected to reflect the sector's diversity: metropolitan and regional, large and small, boarding schools and day schools, a trade training school, and a special assistance school. Participants received an interview guide in advance and conversations were transcribed with consent. We deliberately adopted a broad working definition of flexibility, inviting schools to describe all the ways they work, intentional or otherwise, rather than testing a preset list of arrangements. In some cases interview findings were corroborated with school documents such as flexible work policies, decision matrices, and parent communications.

Emerging themes were tested with participating schools at a validation session in August 2026 and refined into the findings presented here. A subset of four schools were profiled in individual case studies, developed and approved with those schools and published separately. Schools are de-identified throughout this paper.

Limitations. This is a qualitative study of 10 schools in one state; it *maps* the flexibility landscape rather than *measuring* it. Findings reflect what school leaders reported, but **outcomes were not independently verified.** Several significant gaps in current research and practice emerged and are set out in Section 06.

How to use this paper

School leaders may use this paper to reflect on how their school currently works and what else is possible in an education workplace, and to start conversations with boards, leadership teams, staff, parents and students.

HR professionals will find an evidence base and a toolkit. The practices documented here have been demonstrated to work in other independent schools, which is no guarantee of success in every context but should shorten the process of generating new initiatives.

Policymakers and sector bodies will find insight into where change and support is most needed, since the schools in this study innovated despite, not because of, prevailing norms about what an education workplace should be.

Above all this paper is meant to be *used*: annotated, disputed, and taken into leadership meetings, board rooms and staff rooms. The schools that contributed were generous with their successes and their missteps alike, in the spirit of a sector that improves by learning together.

Our enormous gratitude to the leaders from the schools who generously lent their wisdom and experience to this project:

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- Silver Lining School, Ficks Crossing
- St Andrew's Anglican College
- St Margaret's Anglican Girls School
- Tec-NQ
- Trinity Anglican School

01. THE LANDSCAPE

Defining flexible work

Flexible work is **applied variously** and **defined inconsistently**. Across the international literature, flexible work practices are best understood as **formal or informal modifications to the standard terms of employment**, meaning the hours, patterns and location of work, that depart from the default full-time, on-site, fixed-schedule norm (Hill et al., 2001; WGEA, 2020; Bartlett et al., 2025). Precise definitions matter more in schools than elsewhere, because the timetable and duty-of-care obligations complicate the direct transfer of models from other sectors. Yet no consistently agreed definition of flexibility in school workplaces exists.

This paper distinguishes flexibility from work-life balance, the subjective experience of equilibrium between work and personal life, which is sometimes an intended outcome of flexibility. It also distinguishes flexibility from the use of casual, fixed-term or labour-hire contracts. The flexibility discussed here relates to ongoing employees.

The education workforce context

Interest in flexibility is inseparable from the teacher workforce pressures of the 2020s. In 2023, only about a quarter of Australian teachers intended to remain in the profession until retirement, close to two in five intended to leave and a further third were uncertain (AITSL, 2024). Three-quarters of the full-time workforce reported working at least 45 hours per week, and early-career attrition reached approximately 20% within the first three years, driven largely by workload and work-life balance concerns (AITSL, 2025). The shortfall is projected to deepen in at least some parts of the sector (McPherson & Lampert, 2025).

Consequently, workplace flexibility appears in the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (2022–2025) under its teacher-wellbeing and workload priority, acknowledging the role of flexibility in retention (Australian Government, 2022).

The **State of the Independent School Workforce** study (PeopleBench, 2025) provided sector-specific findings. In that survey, completed by staff from 88 schools, flexibility was among the least-favourably ranked aspects of the independent school EVP. The distance between what staff expect of flexibility and what they experience is not a marginal concern. It sits among the sector's largest gaps, in a workforce already reporting significant strain.

Because schools carry a legal duty of care during the school day, depend on continuity of relationships, and frequently operate at minimum staffing levels, implementing flexible work is not as straightforward as in many other sectors. These constraints do not preclude flexibility; instead they require it to be more carefully designed.

The Australian policy landscape

Under Section 65 of the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth; 'the Act'), eligible employees have a right to request flexible arrangements, and schools are required to genuinely consider requests, consult with employees, explore reasonable alternatives where appropriate, and provide a written response within 21 days. Schools should also understand the difference between a flexible work request and an Individual Flexibility Arrangement (IFA) under an award or enterprise agreement. While a flexible work request requires consideration by the employer, an IFA is a mutual agreement that varies certain employment conditions and must leave the employee better off overall.

When assessing requests, schools must **balance employee needs against operational and educational requirements** (e.g. student supervision, continuity of learning, timetabling, workload distribution, safeguarding obligations, service delivery and fairness across staff groups). Decisions should be consistent, evidence-based and clearly communicated to minimise employee relations risks and maintain trust within the workforce.

Employee relations and legal risks can emerge where requests are not genuinely considered, response timeframes are missed, decisions are inconsistent, or arrangements create potential discrimination concerns, or approved arrangements inadvertently increase workloads for other employees or create perceptions of unfairness.

Importantly, from a work health and safety perspective, schools continue to owe duties of care to their staff, regardless of where or when work is performed.

> Flexibility is a runaway train post-COVID; schools must move with it.
>
> - PRINCIPAL

The independent school advantages

Australian independent schools occupy a distinctive position: their structural autonomy both enables and complicates flexibility, and positions the sector unusually well to lead.

- **Greater employer discretion**. Independent schools can design employment conditions suited to their community, size and staffing profile, without some of the constraints in systemic schools.
- **Reputation and culture as retention levers.** Schools that credibly signal flexible-friendly cultures can differentiate themselves in a competitive labour market. The associated recruitment benefit of a larger applicant pool, is potentially available to schools prepared to advertise flexibility authentically.
- **A broader non-teaching workforce.** Finance, marketing, IT, and other professional roles are more suited to hybrid and remote arrangements, offering scope for sector-leading practice.

Independent school constraints

- **Financial variability across the sector is considerable.** The sector encompasses Australia's best-resourced schools as well as low-fee schools serving disadvantaged communities, so the capacity to fund the more costly forms of flexible work differs markedly.
- **Boarding and co-curricular obligations** also add time demands beyond classroom hours: a part-time teacher who is also a leader of a co-curricular program faces a role complexity that the mainstream literature does not address.

02. A NEW MODEL FOR FLEXIBILITY

From flexible arrangements to the flexible workplace

Every school in this study struggled with the same starting problem: determining what counts as flexibility. In most cases leaders' first point of reference was the flexible work arrangement, **a formal or informal variation to an individual's standard working conditions**, negotiated to accommodate personal circumstances within the operational constraints of supervision, timetabling and campus presence.

That definition is **accurate but incomplete**. It frames flexibility as something individuals request and employers grant: a transaction, negotiated one person at a time, potentially in tension with school operations. Viewed through that lens, flexibility looks scarce, costly and risky.

Our interviews with school leaders revealed a different reality. The most impactful practices were not individual arrangements at all - they were collective. This paper therefore proposes a **shift in focus, from flexible work arrangements to the flexible workplace**: a school in which structures, leadership behaviours, cultural norms and operational practices give staff greater agency over how they spend their time. A flexible workplace may include flexible work arrangements, but not it should go further than that.

The distinction matters practically: a school could approve every individual request it receives and still be an inflexible workplace. Another could have few formal arrangements and give staff substantial agency over their time. The question for leaders changes from what arrangements should be allowed to how much agency the school's way of working already gives people.

The SPACE model

If flexibility is a property of the whole workplace rather than a suite of individual arrangements, then building flexibility requires working on the whole workplace. Across the 10 schools in our sample, the practices that worked, and the missteps that provided valuable lessons, clustered consistently into five domains. A school's flexibility posture is the product of all five operating together; strength in one cannot compensate for absence in another.

Structure: how work is designed. This encompasses the timetable, teaching load, calendar, and the physical and operational architecture of the school day. Structure is the primary constraint on what flexibility is possible. Schools that treat the timetable as a design canvas rather than a fixed constraint can potentially unlock flexibility that policy alone cannot create: whole-of-staff time-back initiatives, under-loaded timetables, and curriculum architectures where flexibility emerges as a byproduct of design. Scale matters here: smaller schools have fewer timetable pieces to work with, so solutions must be calibrated to context.

Policy & process: how flexibility is governed. This includes formal frameworks, approval authority, industrial instruments, and the boundaries of what is and isn't available. The central design choice is the level of formalisation: policies create consistency and fairness, but once embedded in industrial instruments they become very difficult to adapt. Good governance also manages operational risks by allowing sufficient lead time, organising approvals by department and term, and using decision aides to make the process simple and transparent. Tightening psychosocial obligations are raising the governance floor for every school.

Attitude: how leadership thinks and acts. These reflect the values and behaviours that leaders model. In our analysis, four factors characterised an effective leadership posture:

- **Trust** between leaders and staff, and amongst staff, is foundational. Staff who believe their leaders care are more likely to accept a "no" without resentment
- **Curiosity** before caution, asking staff what they need before deciding it's too hard
- **A willingness to experiment**, evaluate honestly and pull back without shame
- **Student outcomes** as the central consideration, applied consistently and visibly.

Culture: how staff experience the workplace. Cultural norms in organisations will affect staff perceptions of equity (e.g. differences between teachers and other staff) and shape the daily experience of working with flexibility - they can determine whether the same policy feels like trust or surveillance. Culture is also where schools can lose value; some are more flexible than they realise and they don't communicate it, leaving a significant EVP asset largely invisible.

Evaluation: how outcomes are measured. There is a range of data points and feedback that can indicate whether a school's approach to flexibility is working, but relatively few are assessed rigorously, making this the sector's weakest domain. As flexibility becomes industrially contested, the absence of data becomes a liability.

Using the SPACE model

SPACE can be used as a self-assessment tool for schools looking to understand their current posture and decide where to next. Schools may, for example, assess strength in Attitude and Culture, underinvestment in Structure and gaps in Evaluation.

For boards, the five SPACE domains can be used to guide questions about risk and opportunity. For sector-wide decision-makers it offers a shared vocabulary for comparing practice across very different schools, and may be helpful in identifying where support is most needed.

Leaders should note that using the SPACE model does not negate the need for a thorough assessment of the relevant industrial/employee relations factors, especially compliance with obligations regarding flexible work requests and Individual Flexibility Arrangements.

03. FLEXIBILITY IN PRACTICE

Levels of flexibility in independent schools

Interviews with school leaders in our sample revealed that flexibility in schools is **not one thing but a repertoire operating at three 'levels' reflecting an increasing scale of change:** Level 1 includes arrangements negotiated with individual staff members; Level 2 encompasses school-wide design choices that return time to staff or reduce load; and Level 3 reflects a structural redesign of how work itself (including the work of teaching) is organised.

This section provides a brief summary of initiatives at these three levels. **A repository of flexible work practices identified through our interviews is presented in the Appendix.**

In our sample, **Level 1** arrangements were often administered in response to individual requests. They included part-time loads, job-share or compressed hours arrangements, phased retirement, half-pay leave, leave without pay and manager-discretion working from home for non-teaching staff appear across nearly all 10 schools. Notably, informal Level 1 arrangements outnumbered formal ones in most of the schools in this sample.

> **We've all got flexibility, it just doesn't look the same.**
>
> - HR LEADER

Level 2 initiatives are largely designed to free up time that would otherwise have little control over, creating additional autonomy and opportunities to catch up on other work. In our sample, examples of individual instances range in scale from hours at a time (e.g. rostered attendance at assemblies) to days (e.g. no questions asked leave days) but they all add up to meaningful differences on a term or year basis.

At this level, much of what functions as flexibility for teachers is delivered through whole-of-school scheduling rather than individual arrangements. Choice mechanisms also feature at this level: for example, some schools allow holders of Positions of Additional Responsibility to choose between salary and time release, delivering individualised flexibility within a standard framework.

Level 3 approaches to flexibility in our sample involve redesigning the work itself, creating models with the greatest reach, the greatest potential for impact, and the highest level of potential implementation difficulty.

This represents the current **frontier of practice** in the sector, and is currently practiced by only a few schools in our sample; interventions of this nature also appear infrequently in the existing research literature.

> **We're solving a design problem; flexibility is the outcome.**
>
> - PRINCIPAL

What makes flexibility work

Four enabling factors consistently emerged from our conversations with leaders. The enabling factors support change at all three levels, for all different types of flexibility.

1. **Trust and collaborative culture** was often referenced as foundational to the success of flexible initiatives. Where trust was present (between leaders and staff and among staff themselves), it became feasible to administer flexibility with conversations rather than forms.
2. **Psychological safety** was identified as the precondition for staff being honest about their needs at all, since flexibility cannot respond to needs staff are afraid to disclose.
3. **Board and executive appetite for calculated risk-taking** was cited as a precondition for the boldest practice in the study; we note, however, that tolerance for any risk to the student experience was, understandably, very low.
4. **Mastery of the school timetable** made it so that logistical considerations became considerations rather than outright blockers. Leaders reported success when the colleagues who managed the schedule were treated as strategic partners and took a consultative approach to identifying the potential downstream risks of new initiatives or appointments.

04. THE IMPACT OF FLEXIBILITY

What the evidence shows

The research base for the benefits of flexibility is strongest in the United Kingdom, where the Department for Education has commissioned mixed-methods studies, and is reinforced by systematic reviews and comparable evidence from healthcare and early childhood settings. The research generally aligns around a common core finding: **flexibility is most effective when designed collaboratively and when coverage and quality are protected** by explicit structure. The interventions that succeed are not those that simply permit flexibility but those that engineer it into rosters, task allocation and team agreements (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024; Early Childhood Australia, 2014). Across four outcome areas the findings are consistent in direction, though they vary in strength.

Area 1: Wellbeing and burnout

This is the most robust strand of evidence in the existing literature. Systematic reviews across frontline workforces consistently associate greater control over working time and supportive organisational cultures with lower burnout and higher job satisfaction (Bartlett et al., 2025; Choudhary & Brookes, 2025). In much of this research, flexibility is considered a job resource that offsets the demands of emotionally intensive, relational work.

In schools specifically, part-time roles, **job-sharing, remote work and flexible timetabling** demonstrate measurable benefits for **wellbeing, satisfaction and retention,** notwithstanding persistent **implementation challenges** (Stoddart, 2024). Related research finds that teacher autonomy, a close analogue of flexibility, enhances job satisfaction and mitigates burnout (Ha, Pressley & Marshall, 2025).

Not all types of flexibility have positive wellbeing outcomes in all contexts, though. For example, a large German cross-sectional study of teachers found that **reducing hours to part time without reducing workload can yield little benefit** (Seibt & Kreuzfeld, 2021).

Area 2: Recruitment and retention

Flexibility is increasingly identified as a response to recruitment and retention challenges. A UK survey of more than 7,000 teachers found that **57% were more likely to apply** to schools advertising **flexible-friendly roles** (60% among women) with improved work–life balance the most frequently cited benefit (Department for Education, 2024).

Australian employer research also shows that advertising roles as open to flexible work **increased applicant pools**, and advertising senior roles as open to part-time or job-share specifically increased applications from women (WGEA, 2020). Evidence reviews including some Australian contexts rank **flexible working among the most strongly supported strategies for teacher recruitment and retention**, particularly in **disadvantaged schools** (Evidence for Learning / EEF, 2023; NFER & EEF, 2023). In this research, school leaders acknowledged genuine logistical costs (e.g. timetabling complexity, duplicated meetings), but many assessed that the gains in retaining quality staff, supporting wellbeing and broadening the applicant pool outweighed the costs (Department for Education, 2023).

Area 3: Gender equity and career progression

In a workforce that is majority women, flexibility and gender equity are closely linked. Where part-time work entails relinquishing leadership roles or accepting fragmented duties, flexibility runs the **risk of entrenching rather than reducing** gendered career disadvantage and pay gaps. Senior leaders have historically been more willing to grant flexibility to non-teaching and non-leadership staff, a pattern that disadvantages women seeking to advance while working flexibly (Department for Education, 2019, in TeacherToolkit, 2024).

The counter-evidence to this pattern is encouraging, though: Co-principalship and part-time leadership initiatives in England and Australia demonstrate that seniority and flexibility can be compatible (Department for Education, 2023; Department of Education Victoria, 2023).

Area 4: Student outcomes

Leaders, educators and parents are often rightly concerned about whether flexibility that fragments teacher presence affects learning. The evidence on these outcomes is **reassuring but very limited**. Because teacher wellbeing is associated with student wellbeing and achievement, flexibility that genuinely improves wellbeing may indirectly benefit students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Exceptions exist, however. For example, research into four-day school weeks in the United States showed minimal-to-slightly-negative average effects on student achievement, with stronger negative effects in non-rural schools and for older students (Camp et al., 2024; Morton et al., 2024).

Workload and work intensity

One of the strongest themes emerging from both existing research and our discussions was that flexibility initiatives are most effective when they begin with a **clear understanding of the work itself.** Flexibility is often discussed as a question of hours, location or attendance. In practice, however, it is a question of work design. Schools cannot make informed decisions about flexibility if they do not first understand the size, composition and distribution of the work being performed.

The distinction matters because **reducing hours of work does not necessarily reduce workload**. Research consistently demonstrates that reduced hours arrangements can fail to improve wellbeing outcomes if the same volume of work remains attached to the role. In these cases, flexibility can unintentionally intensify work rather than alleviate it (referred to in the research as a "flexibility paradox"; e.g. Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Chung, 2022).

Schools that invest time in understanding these workload components are able to have informed discussions about what work should remain in a role, what could reasonably be removed, what might transfer elsewhere and whether those impacts are sustainable. Schools that lack this visibility risk inequity concerns and operational disruption.

The interconnectedness of work in schools

Several participating schools noted that flexibility arrangements become difficult to manage when introduced without consideration of **operational constraints, staffing capacity and organisational priorities.** Before they can consider an individual request or larger-scale change, leaders must first understand what can realistically be accommodated.

The schools most advanced in their thinking approached flexibility **proactively rather than reactively**. They understood their staffing profile, identified potential pressure points, monitored demand trends and had established principles to guide decision-making. Less mature approaches tended to rely on responding to requests individually without a broader framework, resulting in concerns about precedent, consistency and perceived inequity.

A **proactive assessment of the relevant factors** might include: requirements for student-facing delivery; understanding the demographic profile and its implications (e.g. an impending wave of retirements); demand for part-time and job-share work; skill shortages for particular roles; availability of backfill and relief staff; timetabling constraints and flow-on effects for school operations; parent expectations; and affordability.

The objective of a proactive assessment is not to determine in advance whether flexibility will or will not be supported. Rather, it is to ensure leaders and staff understand the parameters within which decisions will be made. Schools that undertake this analysis are better placed to implement flexibility confidently, communicate decisions consistently and defend their reasoning if challenged.

Other front-of-mind risks for independent schools

The independent school leaders in our sample were also cognisant of:

- **Equity between teaching and non-teaching staff.** Leaders noted that it is relatively uncomplicated for Business, IT and Finance staff to work from home, but this is not the case for classroom teachers. Most schools in our sample reported grappling with this tension in some way, but one leader offered a useful reframe: "We've all got flexibility, it just doesn't look the same". Several also identified that teachers' holiday entitlements reflected a type of flexibility not available to other roles.
- **Governance, precedent and entitlement.** A recurring concern among participating leaders was the potential for flexibility arrangements to establish expectations that become difficult to modify or unwind over time. This risk is amplified when schools grant arrangements without fully considering their operational impact or without establishing clear review mechanisms.

  This should not discourage experimentation. Rather, it reinforces the importance of thoughtful implementation. Schools may mitigate governance risks by: documenting expectations clearly; establishing review points; piloting new initiatives before broader adoption; evaluating outcomes against agreed measures; and communicating the purpose and conditions of arrangements openly.
- **Double duty of care.** In addition to their duty of care to students, schools owe a duty of care to staff regardless of where or when their work is performed. Flexible and remote working arrangements can carry a different risk profile in terms of psychosocial hazards, workload, supervision, isolation, and ergonomics. When considering change, schools should assess these risks appropriately and document changes so they can be managed and reassessed in future.
- **Operational and continuity risks.** One school in our sample found that unmanaged clustering of long service leave caused significant disruption, prompting more careful approval tracking and planning. Another flagged gaps in camp supervision, co-curricular coverage, and mentor-group consistency created by the use of part-time roles, plus the difficulty of filling residual 0.4 FTE loads when 0.6 FTE positions were appointed. It was also noted that early career staff lose opportunities for informal peer learning when senior colleagues work remotely.
- **Parent and community expectations.** Parents strongly prefer teacher continuity, particularly in primary school settings; leaders from some schools reported that job-sharing has been met with parent resistance, and that parent perceptions remain a constraint on hybrid teaching models.
- **Formalisation cuts both ways.** In some cases, schools took the decision to keep flexibility measures out of their EBA, arguing that once embedded they are difficult to adapt or remove; policy and consultative committees were seen as more agile vehicles to administer flexibility as these are more conducive to piloting new approaches and adapting based on learnings. For example, one school piloted a formal fortnightly work from home policy for professional staff, found it created the risk of animosity and manager burden, and reverted to an ad hoc, manager's discretion approach.

06. THE GAPS

Gaps in the existing research

The evidence is strong on direction and weak on specifics, particularly in the Australian independent school context. Five gaps in the research are notable, and they correspond closely to what schools most need to know in order to act with confidence.

- **Independent and non-government schools.** No system-wide dataset exists on the prevalence, design or outcomes of flexible work in the sector, disaggregated by role type, school characteristics or geography.
- **Non-teaching staff.** Business, administrative, ICT and boarding roles are under-researched despite being highly amenable to flexibility.
- **Longitudinal outcomes.** Most studies are cross-sectional; few track sustained effects on wellbeing, retention and student outcomes.
- **Post-legislative dynamics.** How leaders interpret the strengthened 2023 right to request, and balance legal obligation against operational reality, remains largely unexamined.
- **Informal flexibility and equity.** The informal flexibility teachers value most is rarely measured, and little research examines how it is practised across different employee and school contexts.

Gaps in independent school practice

Our interviews revealed similar gaps in practice among the 10 schools in our sample.

- **Measurement is largely anecdotal.** Schools relied on proxies such as staff surveys and the absence of complaints, and even those with the clearest proxy signals could not isolate academic impact because multiple changes occurred at once.
- **No shared vocabulary exists.** One leadership team recently debated what flexible work even covers, and several found teachers struggle to articulate what flexibility means to them, finding it easier to describe what is not flexible.
- **No proven models exist for the hardest problems.** Some schools expressed hopes to consider a fortnightly work from home day for teachers but knew of no school managing this arrangement successfully; none were aware of a school where nine-day fortnights or hybrid class models had succeeded. Several participants explicitly asked to learn what peers are doing, indicating a need for more channels for sharing practice across the sector.
- **Long-run effects are unknown.** One of the schools that altered its teaching model flagged an emerging risk of narrowing staff expertise and development. Several schools anticipate a wave of teacher retirements driving demand for phased models whose operational limits are untested at scale.
- **Context-dependence limits transferability.** The contrast between a metropolitan girls' school, a trade school, a virtual-hybrid campus and a rural special assistance school underlines that what works is not yet separable from where it works.

07. INSIGHTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This project set out to answer two questions the research literature could not: how do Queensland independent schools actually use flexibility, and what should leaders do about it?

Our review concluded that the open questions are how to design flexible work that fits a school's context and how to implement it well. The following summary is drawn from where the research and the practice of these 10 schools converge.

Recommendations for school leaders

1. **Establish flexibility decision-making principles.** Many schools begin their flexibility journey with an employee request. There is value, however, in first determining the school's philosophy and decision-making principles. Shared principles help leaders make consistent decisions, provide transparency to staff and reduce concerns that outcomes are being determined arbitrarily.

   Clear principles do not guarantee identical outcomes; rather, they provide a consistent framework through which decisions can be evaluated.

2. **Adopt the student outcomes test and use it openly and consistently.** Prioritising the impact on students should be the most explicit, consistent decision-making principle for every school, and leaders should use it as a filter for every decision. This legitimises the decision and aligns staff, parents and board around the same criterion; it also marks clear boundaries for what won't be considered.

3. **Audit before building.** Map current flexibility across all five SPACE dimensions, then decide what to formalise, standardise and promote. Most schools will discover they are more flexible than they know, and the first win is naming it. The SPACE model offers a practical audit frame.

4. **Build capability before complexity.** Many flexibility initiatives fail not because the concept is flawed, but because the capability required to implement them has not yet been developed. Skills in the domains of workforce planning, role design, timetabling, consultation and performance management skills significantly influence successful implementation. Schools without dedicated HR expertise may face additional challenges.

5. **Get compliant, then get ahead.** Understand your obligations to manage both flexible work requests (under the Act) and Individual Flexibility Arrangements (per the applicable award or employee agreement). Request-handling should be reviewed against the post-2023 standard: a documented, genuine attempt to reach agreement, with specific reasons for any refusal and a response within the legislated timeframes. Decision-making should be based on an assessment of WHS risks and employee wellbeing.

6. **Interrogate the timetable.** The largest gains for teaching staff in this study came from load design, scheduling and calendar decisions, rather than individual flexible work arrangements. Leaders might ask what the timetable could give back before considering individual requests, involving the timetabling expert early in a consultative process.

7. **Address workload, not just hours.** In the existing research, reducing work hours without reducing load has been shown to limit success, negating potential wellbeing benefits. Every fractional arrangement warrants an explicit conversation about what comes out of the role, as well as implications for other roles in the school.
8. **Start where friction is lowest, but do not stop there.** Informal, small scale flexibility initiatives build leader confidence and an evidence base before more complex arrangements are attempted. Leaders might consider progressively moving through the levels outlined in Section 03 as their evidence base is established. Pilot with review cycles, and treat a need to reverse or change course as learning rather than failure.
9. **Evaluate and iterate.** Determine the metrics you'll use to assess whether your change is creating the impact you seek, for both staff and students, and review them regularly.

Questions for school boards to discuss

- **What do we actually know about workload in our school?** Many discussions about flexibility begin with hours, attendance or work location. Boards may wish to ask a more fundamental question: do we understand how work is currently distributed across the school? Understanding workload and its operational dependencies provides a stronger foundation for flexibility decisions than focusing solely on individual requests. Schools that understand the work are generally better positioned to redesign it.
- **What is our flexibility posture, and is it a decision or an accident?** Boards should expect a deliberate position, including on whether flexibility features in the school's employee value proposition and recruitment messaging, rather than an accumulation of precedents. Most schools in this study do not promote their flexibility in recruitment: some deliberately, most by default.
- **What would we see in the data if this were working or failing?** A simple dashboard can be enough to reveal meaningful patterns. Consider tracking application volumes and quality, retention trends, sick leave use, wellbeing measures, workload and work intensity, and the workforce age profile. Schools with data make confident decisions; schools without it make hopeful ones.
- **What permission have we given leaders to experiment?** The boldest practice in this study existed because boards explicitly backed risk-taking and treated reversals as learning. Risk appetite is a governance choice and should be made consciously.

A closing word

Ultimately, our review of the prior research and current independent school practice point in the same direction: the benefits of flexibility at work are realised when school-wide initiatives are implemented thoughtfully. Relative to many systemic schools, implementation is where independent schools hold an advantage. They have the autonomy to design their own solutions, the proximity to observe their impact, and a clear decision test: the outcomes for students.

The schools in this study that have moved furthest did not wait for a proven model. They started with a question: *'Why wouldn't we?'* They considered the answer through the lens of their students, involved their staff and kept what worked. As one leader put it: "Most of what we do is only hard because you've got to be prepared to do something different".

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APPENDIX: FLEXIBILITY REPOSITORY

Level 1: Individual arrangements

Practice	Example	Considerations
Half-pay and flexible leave blocks	• Half-pay leave is the highest-uptake arrangement at one school; 14 weeks at half pay approximates a smoothed year • Another school reduced long service leave minimums from term blocks to weekly blocks, with sub-weekly blocks approved by the principal in exceptional circumstances	• Track approvals by department and term. One school experienced significant disruption when three teachers from the same department took long service leave in the same term • One term of notice is a practical minimum
Job sharing	• One school has grown from one to three job-shares, mainly for staff returning from parental leave or nearing retirement • Another matched a teacher seeking 0.8 load with a colleague reducing hours for health reasons, producing a four-day/one-day split that supported both staff members	• Parent communities often resist job sharing in primary years due to continuity concerns • Works best when two complementary needs can be paired
Phased retirement and part-time pathways	• One school has four staff on phased retirement and anticipates growing demand, with 30 staff aged 56 or older • Part-time contracts at another school are set per semester or year rather than locked in permanently	• Forecast retirement demand early and align arrangements with workforce and succession plans • Plan knowledge transfer, mentoring and handover so expertise is retained as hours reduce
Informal, manager-led flexibility	• Compressed hours enabling a Friday early afternoon finish have run for three to four years at one school without issue; ad hoc WFH is approved at team lead's discretion • Leadership staff at another school work from home when not teaching, and requests are rarely declined • One school withdrew a formal fortnightly WFH policy that had created intra-team friction and manager admin burden, replacing it with fully ad hoc, manager-approved arrangements	• Trust between staff and leadership is critical; staff accept refusals more readily where good will has been demonstrated • Formal policies with rigid rules can create inequity between role types • Be willing to trial and withdraw arrangements without framing withdrawal as failure; brief new candidates upfront on what is and is not available
Annualised hours	• One school replaced timesheets for support staff with an annualised calendar. Managers and staff agree non-term hours between themselves and notify HR only if arrangements change	• Requires capable managers and a high- trust culture • Define escalation triggers before launch
Culturally responsive leave	• A special assistance school serving a First Nations community built in cultural leave for community and family obligations, supplemented by additional provisions such as an early Friday finish once responsibilities are complete, free meals for staff, and a week off each term for non-teaching staff	• Balance staffing composition against community obligations so key days remain workable • Set shared expectations early through frank staff conversations about reasonable use

Level 2: Time back and load design initiatives

Practice	Example	Considerations
Discretionary leave days	• One school grants each staff member a branded leave day usable any time without justification. It began at three days per year and now also includes periodic top-ups. Introducing these days ended escalating disputes over ad hoc leave requests and lifted morale noticeably • Another school introduced a flexi leave day through its EBA, taken in two-period blocks with no reason required • A third allows a discretionary day drawn from the personal/sick leave balance	• Budget for relief cover, which can be considerable on fully-loaded teaching days; in practice most staff use their leave on lighter days • Decide whether to embed in the EBA (security for staff) or keep in policy (agility for the school) • High perceived value relative to cost; functions as recognition as much as leave
Fortnightly early finish	• Teachers at one school leave at 1pm one afternoon per fortnight, with no supervision or timetabled classes. The practice has run for around eight years • In the junior school, a dedicated near-full-time relief teacher protects student continuity	• Rationale: teaching staff lack the intra-day flexibility available to professional staff, so time is returned in a structured way • Continuity in relief staffing is particularly valued in the junior years
Teaching below maximum load	• One school schedules all teaching staff at least 50 minutes below maximum contact time, providing a buffer that particularly benefits graduates • Another keeps loads below industrial maximums across the school and under-loads graduate teachers by three periods per week in year one and one period in year two	• Carries a real FTE cost; frame as an investment in retention and teaching quality • One school identified a higher FTE budget as its main five-year ambition, precisely to create timetable breathing room
External exam invigilation	• External invigilators free teachers from three-hour exam supervision blocks • Another school hires external playground supervisors so teachers gain marking time instead of supervision duty	• Low cost, high goodwill • Retired former staff make a reliable, system-familiar supply pool

Level 2: Time back and load design initiatives

Practice	Example	Considerations
Rostered release from whole-school events	• One school rotates each faculty off one inter-house carnival day per year for dedicated faculty time, allows faculties to apply out of fortnightly assembly for marking or group work, and runs Independent Learning Days for Years 11/12 roughly once per term with no teaching or supervision required • Another rosters assembly attendance so staff attend once per term rather than weekly	• Release time is frequently used for collaborative planning, which staff value highly • Retain each initiative only if staff feedback supports continuation
Timetable-embedded free periods	• One school is building chapel services and house meetings into the timetable so teachers not required for those sessions receive a consistent free period, replacing sporadic non-contact time	• Driven by wellbeing and predictable planning space • Requires early timetabler involvement
Calendar and workload smoothing	• Practices at one school include publishing the annual calendar a year in advance, scheduling compliance modules into staff days rather than personal time, and declining to reschedule a weather-cancelled student-free day to avoid intensifying workload • Another school restructured camps to finish on Fridays so teachers do not return exhausted mid-week. This was chosen over a proposed per-night camp allowance after concluding payment did not address the underlying problem	• Identify the underlying problem before defaulting to an allowance • Advance notice can enable greater flexibility
Choice in leadership loading (cash vs. time)	• Recognition for positions of added responsibility at one school can be provided as additional salary, time release, or a combination; most staff choose time release • Another school defaults middle leaders to a 50/50 split of additional pay and time release, negotiable either way • A third gives heads of department a one-class reduction; the measure was piloted, removed, then permanently reinstated after its benefits became clear	• Early-career staff are more likely to choose salary • Some principals prefer limits on trading all time release for cash • Time release must be built into the timetable, not treated as an afterthoughtw
Timetabling as the enabler	• Timetabling is iterative. At one school, a single 0.8 arrangement required restructuring an entire subject line across Years 7 to 12 • Another school consults its dedicated timetabler before approving any flexible arrangement	• Part-time spread across five days is far easier to accommodate than fewer days • Hire for multi-subject coverage; some schools now include live timetable exercises in interviews • Smaller schools have fewer staffing combinations to work with, which narrows options

Level 3: Structural redesign initiatives

Practice	Example	Considerations
Team teacher model	• One school added a 'team teacher' to each primary year level. The role is a peer position, not a leadership one, focused on differentiation in literacy and numeracy. The effective ratio dropped from 1:26 to approximately 1:13 during core lessons • Built largely by repositioning existing staff rather than new hires • Reported results: significantly reduced sick days, reduced teacher stress, weekly rather than annual unit plan updates, and declining NCCD numbers in the junior school	• Have a documented playbook and guardrails ready from day one. The trial year suffered from inconsistent practice and stakeholder confusion before one was written • Team teachers must be strong teachers comfortable in a support role in a colleague's classroom • Communicate explicitly to parents and to other sub-schools to manage value questions and misconceptions
Design-first block timetabling	• A trade-focused school structures the curriculum around full-day subjects: trade learning in one-week blocks, academic learning in two-week blocks, reflecting industry work patterns • Academic teachers receive one full non-contact day per week as a direct result of the design; trainers deliver a two-week block then have a full non-contact week • Staff survey results: 15% report high work intensity versus a 53% state average	• The design solves a curriculum architecture problem first; flexibility emerges as a byproduct • Requires strong clarity of purpose that all staff can articulate • Risks include narrow roles limiting professional breadth for ambitious staff, and adjustment difficulty for teachers from traditional timetables
Virtual or hybrid teaching arm	• One school runs a virtual learning community. Full-time staff attend campus around two days per week after a deliberate on-site induction period; some teachers are fully remote, including interstate • The model has retained high-performing teachers through parental leave and partial long service leave who would otherwise have been lost, and enabled recruitment of specialists regardless of location	• Build culture and expectations on-site before extending remote flexibility • Expect equity questions from on-campus teaching staff and address them openly • Maintain accountability checks; remote arrangements require monitoring, not open-ended trust
Compressed dual-stream staffing (yet to be implemented)	• One school has approval to run a dual-stream day with morning and afternoon teaching 'shifts' • Facility utilisation would be multiplied under this model, and teachers would have the capacity to earn substantially more or work fewer days	• Financially enabled by facility efficiency; model the economics before committing • Expect quiet demand: staff may be interested but reluctant to say so publicly • Regulator and approval timelines can significantly lag school readiness

Level 3: Structural redesign initiatives

Practice	Example	Considerations
Deliberate role rotation	• One school rotates staff annually through an off-site year-level campus to prevent burnout, and rotates senior leaders through roles every few years to maintain freshness and build skill breadth	• High-demand postings become self-recruiting once established • Consider overstaffing intense programs • Rotation trades continuity for renewal; pace it gradually
Central curriculum development team	• At one school, a central team delivers complete term plans covering all curriculum strands at the start of each term. Teachers retain full choice over delivery method	• Particularly valuable where teachers span wide skill ranges or complex cohorts • Removes a workload burden entirely rather than redistributing it
Streaming teachers by strength (at concept stage)	• One school floated streaming teachers into curriculum/pedagogy, pastoral, or co-curricular specialisations rather than expecting all teachers to excel across all three	• Acknowledged as a major cultural and operational shift • Most likely to be adopted under performance or staffing pressure rather than proactively

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