

SCHOOL LEADERS' AND STAFF WELLBEING IS CRITICAL FOR STUDENT SUCCESS



OUR SCHOOLS – OUR FUTURE
RESEARCH PAPER
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Prepared by
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OUR SCHOOLS – OUR FUTURE

Our Schools – Our Future is an Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) research-based initiative designed to promote informed public policy debate about schooling. Through commissioned and internal research, Our Schools – Our Future explores trends and issues in key areas which determine the nature and performance of our school education systems. While the initiative has a particular focus on the contribution of independent schools to our education provision and outcomes, it examines a range of issues and trends relevant to the development and implementation of effective public policy for schooling. All research reports are available to members on the ISQ website.

DISCLAIMER

Independent Schools Queensland commissioned this paper. The authors accept full responsibility for the views expressed herein. ISQ does not necessarily support all of these views.

Foreword

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) commissioned this research paper to better understand the key factors influencing the wellbeing of school staff and how staff wellbeing influences student wellbeing and educational outcomes.

In their report, Professor Donna Cross and Sarah Falconer of the Telethon Kids Institute present a broad perspective on what promotes or erodes school staff wellbeing, make the links to student wellbeing and point to areas for further attention by both school leaders and public policy makers.

Much public attention and discourse has been given to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools and their communities. In this report, Cross and Falconer focus on teaching and learning, noting that many teachers have reported the pandemic has significantly increased their workload. Managing this workload and job intensification, adapting to the education environment, managing the increased administration workload as well as the behaviour and safety concerns of staff and students were just some of the factors that appear to have impacted school leader and staff wellbeing.

The authors note that when compared to similar social professions, teachers' rate their wellbeing lower and have one of the highest occupational rates of workplace mental stress claims in

Australia, with many school principals at serious risk of suffering from adverse health conditions resulting from stressors associated with their work. Internationally, research suggests teaching is a high stress occupation, with especially high rates among early career teachers who are leaving the profession.

The apparent links between patterns of workplace mental stress and teacher attrition rates warrant attention. High rates of teacher attrition have significant economic costs including the cost of recruiting, training, and supporting new teachers, as well as non-economic costs to schools and communities. Importantly, teacher attrition has been shown to have negative flow-on effects for student achievement. Improving working conditions may enable schools to better attract and retain their staff.

The authors point to some areas for attention by school leaders and public policy makers that have the potential to promote greater wellbeing in schools and students:

1. Prioritise school community wellbeing.
2. Track wellbeing priorities and progress.
3. Enable and sustain supportive leadership practices.
4. Provide effective induction and mentoring, and meaningful professional learning.

5. Seek public policy reforms to: (a) address staff workload intensification; (b) increase equitable access to trained mental health professionals in all schools; and (c) protect school leaders and staff from the impact of aggressive and offensive behaviour directed at them.

These and other initiatives have the potential to improve staff and student wellbeing levels and to foster a healthier society. I encourage you to read this report.



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Executive Summary

Increasing evidence shows school leaders and teachers benefit both professionally and personally from having high levels of wellbeing, improving their health, relationships, and creativity, as well as their professional commitment and job performance. However, while most education professionals enjoy the many opportunities working in schools and with students provides, they are also exposed to numerous stressors that can compromise their wellbeing, including excessive workload, complex and challenging student needs and responding to parent demands, a lack of appreciation and respect for their profession, and in some cases insecure employment.

Frequent contact with these stressors can lead to burnout, stress, health and relationship problems and fatigue - including feeling emotionally exhausted - which in turn can negatively influence school leaders' and teachers' motivation, job satisfaction and their likelihood of remaining in the profession. Also, the mental health and wellbeing of school leaders and teachers, not surprisingly has a significant impact on student wellbeing and achievement. The influence of reduced job satisfaction and self-efficacy, for example, impacts school staffs' motivation and ability to create a supportive school environment conducive to positive relationships, and students' learning and overall wellbeing.

Further, the disruptions caused by COVID-19 restrictions and subsequent health and learning implications have highlighted both the critical front-line role of the education profession in helping our communities to recover, and the impact of this additional work on the current and emerging wellbeing challenges for the profession. However, this disruption was minimised or worsened according to the way schools were able to respond. School staff who felt positive about the way their own school responded to COVID-19, reported greater wellbeing and more life satisfaction.

While many school leaders reported some COVID-related changes and challenges that positively impacted teachers' pedagogy and relationships, they generally felt it negatively impacted their own and their staff wellbeing. More than 80% of teachers for example, reported the pandemic has significantly increased their workload. Managing this workload and job intensification, adapting to the education environment, managing the increased administration workload as well as supporting the behaviour and safety concerns of staff and students (and their own family) were some of the factors that appear to have influenced school leader and staff wellbeing.

School leaders, along with teachers, are essential to securing student academic success and wellbeing by creating supportive school

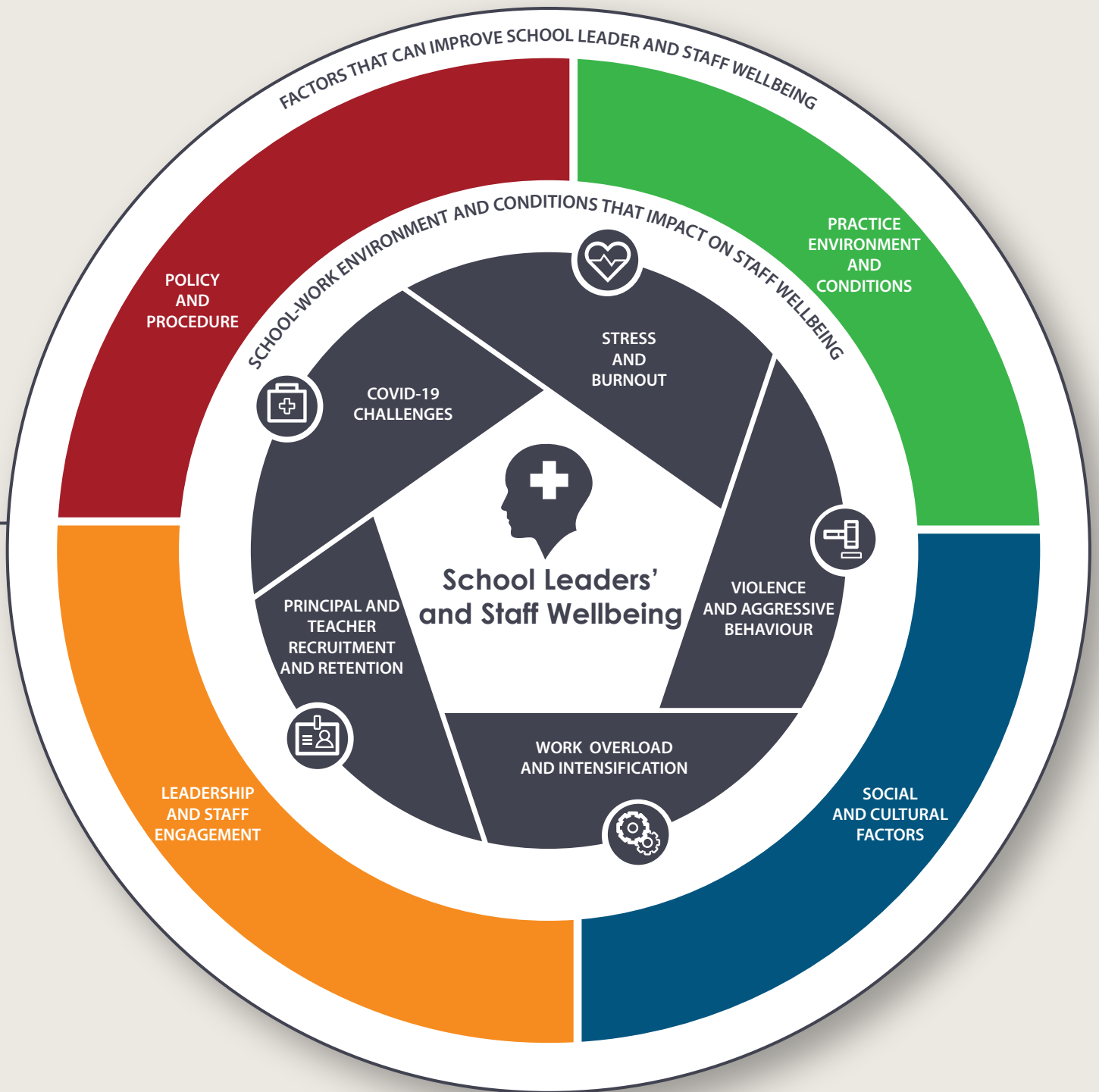
environments or building a positive school culture. Much evidence suggests that if school leaders and other school staff feel well and supported in school environments, their positive relationships for example, will positively impact students' wellbeing and educational success. Positive relationships between all members of the school community critically underpin wellbeing.

It is therefore imperative to consider these influences on wellbeing, particularly the impact of school climate on the school community, when implementing policy and practices to improve school leaders' and staff mental health and wellbeing - not only for career performance and commitment, but for the health and wellbeing of the whole school community.

This paper provides the following recommendations and some practical evidence-based actions found to protect and promote the wellbeing of school leaders and staff, and to also support staff who may be experiencing difficulties with their mental health and wellbeing.

Five wellbeing recommendations

- 1** Prioritising the school community's wellbeing and ensuring improvements are contextual, sustain evidence-based practice, focus on relationships, and underpin the whole-school culture.
- 2** Enabling and sustaining supportive leadership practices that build teacher wellbeing.
- 3** Providing effective induction and mentoring, and meaningful professional learning that is sustained and authentic.
- 4** Tracking wellbeing priorities and progress to benchmark, monitor and effectively meet the wellbeing strengths and needs of the school community.
- 5** Advocating for government policy reform addressing staff workload, resourcing, and safety. Specifically, at a broader system level, the following actions are needed to positively impact school leader and staff wellbeing:
 - Identify and address the drivers of workload intensification.
 - Facilitate equitable access to trained mental health professionals in all Australian schools to respond to the increasing complexity of student behaviour and mental health and wellbeing difficulties.
 - Use policy reform to protect school leaders and staff from the impact of aggressive and other offensive behaviour directed at them.



Five Wellbeing Recommendations

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- 2 Enabling and sustaining supportive leadership practices that build teacher wellbeing.
- 3 Providing effective induction and mentoring, and meaningful professional learning that is sustained and authentic.
- 4 Tracking wellbeing priorities and progress to benchmark, monitor and effectively meet the wellbeing strengths and needs of the school community.
- 5 Advocating for government policy reform addressing staff workload, resourcing, and safety.

Why is school leaders' and staff wellbeing so important?

While school staff wellbeing is not prioritised in many schools (McCallum, 2021) it is central to the success of the school community, principal leadership (Ontario Principals' Council, 2017), quality teaching and the health and wellbeing of students.

An individual's wellbeing encompasses their mental health, quality of life, job satisfaction and happiness (OECD, 2015) and is marked by a capacity to manage emotional, social, academic, and occupational challenges (WHO, 1948) occurring within supportive environments – those lacking 'physical, social, psychological, emotional, economic, and cognitive distress' (La Placa, McNaught, & Knight, 2013).

School leader and other school staff wellbeing impacts employee job commitment, satisfaction, performance (Greany & Earley, 2021) and system-level administrative outcomes (Roffey, 2012; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011) and is influenced by interactions between the individual, their work, and their environment (Bagnall, Jones, Akter, & Woodall, 2016). School leaders are essential to securing student academic success and wellbeing (Leithwood, Sun, & Pollock, 2017) by creating supportive school environments or culture.

Importantly, greater teacher wellbeing is associated with enhanced professional commitment and motivation, job satisfaction (Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2014; Turner, 2019) lower work-family conflict and health and life contentment (Collie, Shapka, Perry, & Martin, 2016; Turner, 2019). Given teachers' job satisfaction is positively associated with self-efficacy (OECD, 2014), enthusiasm, motivation, commitment (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Tschannen-Moran, Price, Nienke M. Moolenaar, & Gareis, 2015) job performance (OECD, 2014) and career longevity; this in turn influences student wellbeing, behaviour, attendance, and educational outcomes (Arens & Morin, 2016; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Collie & Martin, 2017; Spilt et al., 2011).

THE INTER-RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHER AND STUDENT WELLBEING AND OUTCOMES

Given teacher wellbeing, student wellbeing, relationships within the school, and educational outcomes are closely intertwined (Harding et al., 2019; McCallum, Price, Graham, & Morrison, 2017), it isn't surprising that for all students to be well, their teachers must be well too (McCallum et al., 2017). Higher teacher wellbeing enables greater student connections and professional commitment, as well as enhanced student learning and achievement outcomes (Arens & Morin, 2016). Further, teachers' self-efficacy has a positive relationship with student achievement, and



motivation (OECD, 2014) because it enables instructional creativity and ensures curriculum planning matches student needs (Tschannen-Moran et al., 2015)

Burnout, stress, and fatigue affects teachers' engagement, impacting the quality of their pedagogy (Dabrowski, 2020). Importantly, teacher burnout is also associated with increased student cortisol levels, suggesting that teacher stress can influence student physical stress responses. Given emotionally exhausted teachers in the United States are more likely to give more student discipline referrals and more in-school suspensions (Eddy et al., 2020), there may be a reason for the heightened cortisol amongst students.

Environmental stressors also influence teachers' 'motivation, self-efficacy, and job commitment' (Klassen et al., 2013); with their own wellbeing impacting their attitudes, teaching effort and interaction with students and others (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Steca, 2003). Further, teachers with low wellbeing often have difficulty forming positive student relationships, impacting their ability to manage classroom behaviour (Harding et al., 2019). The quality of their teaching is also affected, increasing the risk of poor student behaviour in their classroom (Iancu, Rusu, Măroiu, Păcurar, & Maricuțoiu, 2017), affecting students' learning outcomes (Cardoza, 2021).

Consequently, much evidence suggests that if principals and other school staff feel well and supported in school environments, this in turn will positively impact students' wellbeing and educational success (Cardoza, 2021; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

Impact of the school-work environment and conditions on school leaders' and staff wellbeing

Stress and burnout

Teachers' work-related motivation and self-efficacy are impaired by 'challenging working conditions and stressful working environments' (Klassen et al., 2013), reducing the quality of their teaching (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018) and harming their wellbeing and health. In a report highlighting perceptions of teachers and teaching in Australia, Heffernan et al (2019, p. 14) identified the following key challenges experienced by school staff:

- "Excessive workloads
- Public perceptions of teaching and schooling
- Loss of professional trust, judgment, and autonomy
- Heavy focus on data and testing, narrowed curriculum as a result
- Lack of support, affecting their ability to do their job
- Need for more time to meet increased administrative demands, or needing more time to focus on teaching
- Student behaviour, community behaviour, behaviour of other staff members
- Bullying and other safety concerns for students and for teachers".

The combined effect of these factors along with the cascading impact of low teacher wellbeing can also affect organisational outcomes through staff attrition, reduced commitment, and absenteeism (Borman & Dowling, 2017; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013; Weiss, 1999) with job dissatisfaction leading to attrition, stress, and burnout (Alarcon, 2011; Harmsen, Helms-Lorenz, Maulana, & van Veen, 2018; Tehseen & Ul Hadi, 2015).

Burnout among school staff including leaders is characterised by emotional exhaustion (a chronic state of emotional depletion), cynicism, detachment (depersonalisation), lowered feelings of personal accomplishment (personal inefficiency) and a reduced perception of student achievement (Bagnall

et al., 2016; Iancu et al., 2017), affecting even the most dedicated. Burnout has been associated with physical and mental health issues (Iancu et al., 2017) and an increase in staff absenteeism (McCallum et al., 2017) and turnover; reducing teaching quality, student achievement and misbehaviour, resulting in a burnout cycle where student misbehaviour negatively impacts emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment (Reynolds, Bruno, Ross, Hall, & Reynolds, 2020). Oberle et al (2020) and Schonert-Reichl (2016) found that students can tell when teachers are experiencing burnout or demoralisation, as demonstrated by correlations between teacher-reported burnout and student-reports of their teacher's social-emotional competence.

The impact of work stress on wellbeing is well documented. Education professionals rank their profession as one of the most stressful (Dabrowski, 2020; De Nobile, 2017; Johnson et al., 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015) experiencing high rates of physical (Cook et al., 2017) and increasing rates of mental health problems (OECD, 2020). Stress can negatively impact attention, memory, and emotional regulation (Education Support, 2020) and is linked to physical health complications including cardiovascular disease (Naghieh, Montgomery, Bonell, Thompson, & Aber, 2015) and mental wellbeing issues such as depression (Naghieh et al., 2015) (Emerson et al., 2017; Mulholland, McKinlay, & Sproule, 2017). As a result, when compared to similar social professions, (e.g., social work and health), teachers' report significantly lower wellbeing (Grenville-Cleave & Boniwell, 2012) and the higher levels of occupational health stress (Riley, 2017), with many school principals at serious risk of suffering from adverse health conditions resulting from stressors associated with their work (Riley, See, Marsh, & Dicke, 2021). Internationally, research suggests teaching is a high stress occupation, with especially high rates among early career teachers who are leaving the profession (Perrone, Player, & Youngs, 2019).

Environmental stress is often caused by relational factors, work overload, sense of worth and unpredictable policy environments (McCallum et al., 2017) - where educators are increasingly expected to do more with limited resources. To reduce stress and associated psychological risk school leaders and staff need to be able to balance job demands (e.g.: workload) with job resources that help to buffer job demands (e.g.: control, support) (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Halbesleben, 2006). Burnout is associated with exhaustion (high job demands) and disengagement (from low job resources).

Violence and aggressive behaviours

Environmental stress can also stem from trauma (i.e., school bullying and violence) experienced when handling circumstances school staff are not trained to manage practically or emotionally (Reynolds et al., 2020), with increased experiences of poor behaviour - especially violence - from both students and parents (Heffernan et al., 2019). A principal's role is not only stressful, it can also be dangerous (Riley et al., 2021), as evidenced in 2020, when more than 40% of Australian school principals reported experiencing threats or physical violence. Longitudinal trends suggest increased exposure to 'aggression, bullying, physical violence, slander, sexual harassment, threats of violence and verbal harassment towards principals' (Riley et al., 2021). In Australian schools, aggressive and other offensive behaviours are significant stressors affecting teachers' sense of safety, (Shine, 2015), and their retention and attrition (Buchanan et al., 2013).

While positive relationships critically underpin wellbeing, relational factors including behavioural problems (students, colleagues, parents), challenging colleagues and administration, and relationships with parents, school staff (Kidger et al., 2016) and students (Spilt et al., 2011) can affect school staff's interpersonal relationships and self-esteem (Paterson & Grantham, 2016). Globally, evidence also suggests bullying interactions between teachers, students and/or leaders has a deleterious impact on teachers' safety (real and perceived) and wellbeing (De Vos & Kirsten, 2015; Fahie & Devine, 2014).

Work overload and intensification

Job demands are linked to work overload (Cazes, Hijzen, & Saint-Martin, 2015), with excessive work overload defined as working 50 hours or more per week (OECD, 2013). Australian longitudinal studies led by Riley (2014; Riley, 2015, 2017, 2019; Riley et al., 2021) investigating principal wellbeing found just over half worked 20 hours or more above the national average, with one-quarter working more than 61-65 hours

per week – levels impacting both mental and physical health and wellbeing (Riley et al., 2021). These Australian workload patterns are reflected by principals globally (e.g., (Bristow, Ireson, & Coleman, 2007; Pollock, 2014; Pollock & Winton, 2015; U.K. Department for Education, 2014).

Pollock (2014, 2015, 2016) describes the cumulation of workload and work hours teamed with increased role complexity and responsibility as 'principal work intensification', even before the impact of COVID-19 on school staff. With principals spending increasing amounts of their time immersed in accountability administration (Forde & Torrance, 2016; Pollock, 2015; Pollock & Winton, 2015; Volante, 2012), health and wellbeing concerns (Poirel, Lapointe, & Yvon, 2012; Pollock, 2014, 2015, 2016) and digital communication (Pollock, 2014, 2015, 2016). A principal's role is also conducted within an ever-changing web of educational reform (Fullan 2008; Evans 2016; Edge 2016), influenced by adaptations and modifications to information and communication technology (ICT) (Dibbon & Pollock, 2007; Gurr, 2004; Pollock, 2015) while also adapting to and addressing student needs (Briscoe & Pollock, 2017; Pollock, 2016; Ryan, 2006).

International studies conducted by UNESCO and the OECD found a debilitating pattern of 'time famine', caused by an increase in academic monitoring and assessment requirements, reducing opportunities for professional learning and development (UNESCO, 2009).

Work intensification together with a focus on school, student and staff performance and accountability has impaired the development and sustainability of a healthy work-life balance and intensifies school-related pressures resulting in increased levels of staff stress and stress-related illness (La Placa et al., 2013).

Teachers spend approximately, an additional 135 minutes/day on work-related tasks (Garrick et al., 2018) due to a lack of non-contact time for lesson planning (McCallum et al., 2017), time spent on administrative tasks (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018), and feeling responsible for students' educational outcomes (Paterson & Grantham, 2016). Time spent in additional work-related activity was significantly related to higher levels of school staff fatigue, negative work-life balance, poor wellbeing (Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni Jr, 2005) and higher rates of stress, and burnout (Sass, Seal, & Martin, 2011); with heavy workloads impacting early attrition (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Sass et al., 2011). Australian teachers report working more hours per week than teachers in other OECD countries; with many struggling with escalating workloads (Manuel, Carter, & Dutton, 2018).



QIS WELLBEING SURVEY 2019

In March 2019, a convenience sample of mainly middle and senior school leadership staff from Queensland Independent Schools completed a brief wellbeing survey administered as part of a wellbeing professional learning event. This survey found these staff (most of whom had worked in schools for 20 or more years) work an average of 46-55 hours a week and reported poorer work life balance compared to other Australian professions. Of those surveyed, however, most reported high levels of resiliency and mental health compared to Australian norms. Most also reported they had good leadership and school staff and community support, but fewer opportunities than they would like for professional growth, and limited influence on school policies and decision making.

Establishing a work-life balance is connected to wellbeing and is critical to maintain motivation, develop resilience, and manage workload (Zawadzki, Smyth, & Costigan, 2015). However, the compounding result of work overload, work intensification, and long working hours is eroding school leaders' and staff personal time, contributing to work-family conflict twice as high in school leaders compared to the general population (Riley et al., 2021). Based on the effort-recovery model, time spent in work-related tasks outside working hours maintains the stress response. This hinders the ability to recover, resulting in increased fatigue and less capacity for engagement; further affecting health and wellbeing and cannibalising time for physical activity (Garrick et al., 2018). Being physically active enhances cognitive function, wellbeing and disease prevention by promoting brain activity, executive functioning, improved brain plasticity and reduced anxiety and depression (Beisser, Peters, & Thacker, 2014).

Teacher recruitment and retention

A small percentage of staff turnover enables the introduction of new ideas and experiences into the workplace; however, too much can harm staff performance (Conley & You, 2013). Currently, school staff recruitment and retention are major global challenges (OECD, 2020; See, Morris, Gorard, & El Soufi, 2020; Sutch, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016) with many schools struggling to retain quality teachers (See, Morris, Gorard, & El Soufi, 2020; See, Morris, Gorard, Kokotsaki, & Abdi, 2020).

In Australia, student numbers are estimated to reach 255,756 students by 2031 (McCrindle, 2017); highlighting an ever-increasing demand for teachers (McCallum, 2021). However, Australia is increasingly experiencing a teacher shortage, particularly in specialist areas and in rural and remote schools (Kline, White, & Lock, 2013; Lampert & Burnett; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011); due to an ageing workforce (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Kearney, 2014) and high rates of teacher



attrition (Allen, Rowan, & Singh, 2019, p. 99). Increased job demands and hours worked, insecure employment, and casualisation were suggested as reasons why teachers are resigning. Heffernan et al. (2019, pp. 15-16) found teachers are considering leaving the profession because of the:

- "Impact on their health, wellbeing, family, and relationships, and subsequent exhaustion, fatigue, stress, and burnout.
- Increase in student and family challenges, including expectations to meet diverse and complex student needs and demands from parents.
- Extended responsibilities and duties beyond teaching, including the changing focus of schooling and increased focus on testing and a narrowed curriculum.
- Lack of appreciation, recognition, and respect for the profession and loss of trust in teachers".

High rates of teacher attrition also have significant economic costs including the cost of recruiting, training, and supporting new teachers (Watlington, Shockley, Guglielmino, & Felsher, 2010), as well as non-economic costs to schools and communities (Brasche & Harrington, 2012; Sorensen & Ladd, 2018). When teachers leave the profession, it has a negative impact on student achievement (Kearney, 2014), especially if students are taught by a succession of new teachers' limiting opportunities to build a positive relationship (Watlington et al., 2010, p. 26).

Principal recruitment and retention

While most principals find fulfilment in their profession (Bristow et al., 2007; Canadian Association for Principals & Alberta Teachers' Association, 2014; Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2015; Leithwood & Azah, 2014a, 2014b; Pollock, 2014, 2016; Pollock & Winton, 2015; U.K. Department for Education, 2014) the role is becoming less appealing (Doyle & Locke, 2014; Fink & Brayman, 2016; Pollock, 2014; Riley, 2015, 2017; Russell & Sabina, 2014).

Internationally, principals' report the increasing diversity of the student population requires schools to regularly adapt policies and practices to respond to students' behavioural and mental health needs or concerns (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2015; Pollock, 2015, 2016; Riley, 2015, 2017; U.K. Department for Education, 2014). These adaptations are being made within tight budget structures – placing additional pressures on school leaders, their available resources, and partnerships (Auerbach, 2012; Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Sanders, 2014).

A school leaders' time and energy are consequently stretched, unable to administer pedagogical leadership due to system-level administrative requirements and priorities (Riley, 2014). Further, the confluence of pressures to adopt new programs together with inconsistent reforms and accountability requirements contribute to work intensification and reduced school leader wellbeing (Ontario Principals' Council, 2017). A principal's wellbeing affects all aspects of their functioning, their decisions, relationships, strengths, and capabilities and is central to the wellbeing and effectiveness of all other members of the school community.

Impact of COVID-19 on school leaders' and staff wellbeing

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic Australian school leaders have had to promptly address education disruptions and quickly implement system-level policy directives. These unique circumstances and unprecedented challenges further compounded pre-pandemic issues related to work-life balance, workload intensification, and burnout. Since 2020 almost all principals (97%) reported working overtime, with about 70% reporting they worked more than 56 hours during the school term, and 25 hours a week during school holidays (Riley et al., 2021).

Workload intensification, increased uncertainty (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020), adjusting educational instruction and the impacts of online learning on instruction and relationships were some of the many factors school staff responded to during the pandemic (Department of Education, 2020). A 2020 study of 1,170 Western Australian school staff members, including 615 teachers, 335 administrators, and 146 classroom-based support staff, found that 75% reported elevated stress levels (Department of Education, 2020). Over 6.5% of these school staff scored in the depressive risk range (Runions, Pearce, & Cross, 2021) compared to 6.2% in recent nationally representative estimates of depressive disorder in adults, which includes many people not in the workforce. Moreover, 82% of teachers reported that the pandemic has increased their workload somewhat (37%) or a lot (45%). Open-ended responses identified many respondents who reported challenges to their emotional wellbeing. Importantly however, staff who felt positive about their own school's COVID-19 response reported a better quality of life, including greater wellbeing and more life satisfaction (Department of Education, 2020).

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 highlighted school leaders' escalating workload and the negative impact of this on their wellbeing (Harris & Jones, 2020). Australian data suggest principals' work-related stress was comparable during 2019 and 2020 (Riley et al., 2021) with their role becoming less predictable in 2020 than previously, because their job role was less clear (Arnold, Rahimi, & Riley, 2021).

The main stressors for teachers appeared to stem from the quantity of work, lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, workplace expectations and mental health issues of students (Riley et al., 2021). Teachers feared for example, their students' prolonged isolation from school and their peers would lead to anxiety, disconnection, and withdrawal (The Educator, 2020). The compounding impacts



of these factors highlighted many issues prevalent prior to the pandemic – particularly the harmful effects of staff workload intensification on wellbeing (Mahfouz, Greenberg, & Rodriguez, 2019; Ontario Principals' Council, 2017; Pollock, Wang, & Mahfouz, 2020).

Conversely, the unexpected upskilling in digital literacy and reliance on digital platforms also enabled new ways for teachers to engage with students and parents (Department of Education, 2020), such as new and creative ways to deliver online classes, pre-recorded video content, using interactive games and tasks, and including students' home environments in activities - such as gardening and cooking (The Educator, 2020). While many principals reported that COVID-19 changes and challenges positively impacted teachers' educational instruction and relationships; they also indicated it negatively impacted their wellbeing (Flack, Walker, Bickerstaff, Earle, & Johnson, 2021). The pandemic allowed principals the freedom to reprioritise their workload (Beauchamp, Hulme, Clarke, Hamilton, & Harvey, 2021) with Australian school leaders promoting 'compassionate, humanising goals' (Longmuir, 2021); changes leading to a more supportive work environment and a greater sense of connectedness and collaboration (Arnold et al., 2021; Beauchamp et al., 2021; Longmuir, 2021). Certain offensive behaviours directed at school staff also reduced in 2020, due to parents restricted in-person access to their child's school during COVID-19 restrictions (Riley et al., 2021).

What factors can improve school leaders' and staff wellbeing?

Practice and environment conditions

System- and school-level job resources can buffer the impacts of job demands and stressors (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Riley, 2017). Accordingly, improving working conditions can enable schools to attract and retain staff (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007; Borman & Dowling, 2017). Factors that improve working conditions include physical space, classroom composition, disciplinary approaches, and staff autonomy. Physical space also influences school organisational structures, teaching and learning; for example, poor thermal comfort, poor lighting and ventilation, dirty and inoperable windows, dirty bathrooms, and lack of cleanliness are all associated with teacher burnout (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). Further, high noise exposure is associated with low job satisfaction, reduced energy, and increased teacher attrition (Kristiansen, Persson, Lund, Shibuya, & Nielsen, 2011). Conversely, classrooms fitted with appropriate lighting and the ability to control classroom temperature benefited teachers' wellbeing (Earthman, Uline, & Lemasters, 2009). Class composition also impacts teachers' job satisfaction (OECD, 2014) with time spent on disciplinary action impacting the quality of their teaching (OECD, 2019), and contributing to psychological stress and burnout (Spilt et al., 2011).

Leadership and staff engagement

A healthy school climate facilitated by a supportive leadership team who provide opportunities for 'professional growth, control, autonomy, meaningful communication, and decision-making opportunities' is integral in enhancing and maintaining school staff wellbeing (Greany & Earley, 2021). It is the critical responsibility of school leaders to set the tone and expectations of the school community's behaviour.

Developing strong leadership structures by prioritising actions and delegating responsibilities through distributed leadership enhances career longevity, where leadership teams

develop capability and influence positive outcomes in others (Bevington Group, 2015). Distributed leadership also enhances student achievement and school development (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Tan, 2018) by building trust, cooperation, and respect among school staff (Bellibas & Liu, 2018) and strengthening teachers' commitment to school policy and practice (Hallinger & Lu, 2014).

Principal leadership practices are also closely associated with teachers' self-efficacy (Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016) impacting teachers' wellbeing by influencing job performance, commitment and satisfaction. For example, managing the varied relationships with and expectations of colleagues and parents, compounded by a lack of perceived leadership support, can impact negatively on teachers' wellbeing (Kidger et al., 2016; Mulholland et al., 2017). Enhanced professional wellbeing and self-efficacy, less work-related stress and pressure, and a greater capacity to prioritise their students was also reported by teachers who received support from their colleagues and school leaders (Aelterman, Engels, Van Petegem, & Pierre Verhaeghe, 2007). Job satisfaction is also higher when teachers receive support for their personal growth (Tang, Wang, Blythe Liu, & Li, 2020).

Social and cultural factors

A school's climate is the consequence of the school leader's commitment to promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; promoting school connectedness and safety; and enabling respectful, trusting, caring, inclusive and supportive relationships throughout the school community, including parents. The climate and culture of a school directly impacts student achievement (Witziers, Bosker, & Krüger, 2003) by driving the motivation and engagement of teachers and also preparing them for work-related challenges. It is defined as "unwritten cultural norms, developed and reinforced by managers, teachers,



and students, which impact teaching practice” (Humphries & Burns, 2015 pg. 241) and is associated with teacher commitment and policy management (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Deal & Peterson, 1999).

The following seven school specific components of school climate (in addition to curriculum) were identified in two substantial literature reviews (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Freiberg, 2005) to be the most closely associated with student academic achievement and student wellbeing:

1. Teacher-student and student-student relationships in a culture of equity and fairness.
2. School community’s perception of school social, emotional, and physical safety.
3. Students’ level of school connectedness, engagement, and participation.
4. School’s academic care and focus on learning.
5. School’s physical environment.
6. School’s organisation and order.
7. School’s behavioural expectations and discipline.

Policy and procedures

School leaders and teachers in Australia, especially since the onset of COVID-19, function within a fluctuating operational system, with directives from Federal and State Governments driving curriculum, teacher accreditation and certification and performance requirements (Kearney, 2014), contributing to work intensification (Johnson et al., 2005; Le Cornu, 2013).

Policy and reforms are usually ‘done to’ teachers, rather than engaging with teachers, allowing a collective voice or influence on policy decisions (Thomson & Riddle, 2019). The collective voice and insights of school leaders’ and staff into the challenges they face are critical to inform policy and practice (Gozali, Claassen Thrush, Soto-Peña, Whang, & Luschei, 2017; Heffernan et al., 2019) and in turn this sense of agency helps to improve their wellbeing.

Accountability policies and performance evaluations can also impact school staff wellbeing by contributing to stress and potentially lower job satisfaction (von der Embse, Sandilos, Pendergast, & Mankin, 2016), unless performance management is linked with personal goals, which can increase motivation and commitment from teachers (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020).

Recommendations to improve school leaders' and staff wellbeing

1

Prioritise the school community's wellbeing and ensure improvements are contextual, sustain evidence-based practice, focus on relationships, and underpin the whole-school culture

APPOINT A DEDICATED WELLBEING TEAM

Organisational level wellbeing interventions that recognise the cultural complexities of schools and educational organisations are needed (Dabrowski, 2019; Naghieh et al., 2015). Evidence suggests whole-school approaches, including school community engagement, are critical to facilitate collective decision making and consultation to effectively enhance equity, commitment, self-efficacy and wellbeing (Collie et al., 2012; Greany & Earley, 2021). Engaging a dedicated school wellbeing team with a clear strategic mandate and active school leader support to provide leadership and coordinate meaningful wellbeing initiatives, is key to wellbeing policy and practice sustainability and improvement of whole-school community wellbeing. Addressing (all) staff wellbeing is the necessary first step for a school wellbeing team.

STRENGTHEN SCHOOL CLIMATE

Given the school climate is the effect of the school on its community, it isn't surprising that it is critical to enabling and enhancing school leader, staff, and student wellbeing. Sustained and KPI-linked effort is needed to improve the quantity and quality of relationships between staff, and between staff and students. Additionally, commitment is needed to improve the overall administrative climate - reflecting the policies and practices that create opportunities to positively influence the relationships and collaboration between school staff, including the quality of relationships between the leadership and staff (Perrone et al., 2019; Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, & Justice, 2008; Sharrocks, 2014), and intentionally embed social and emotional learning in the curriculum (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015).

Collie (2021) summarised the following actions to ameliorate work pressures and improve school climate and practice:

- Reducing extraneous workload during busy times of the year (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018).
- Actively supporting and encouraging teachers to recharge and nurture their own wellbeing (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2015).
- Supporting teachers to navigate the common challenges that can occur in the teaching profession (Martin & Marsh, 2008).
- Supporting teachers to be adaptable in their work (Collie, Malmberg, Martin, Sammons, & Morin, 2020) and enhancing their capacity to effectively managing change (Collie & Martin, 2016).

ENABLE UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO QUALITY RESOURCING

Providing staff with quality evidence-based mental health resources and easy access (including training) to robust mental health programs is important (Jennings et al., 2017; Klingbeil & Renshaw, 2018), especially to support students with complex needs and to staff in rural and remote areas. This increased system and school-level resourcing needs to include increased and equitable access for students and their families to learning support practitioners and specialist teachers, and other allied practitioners, including students with behavioural and / or mental health difficulties. Fostering a whole of school approach, in addition to targeting interventions for high-needs students, also minimises the stigma of any member of the whole school community seeking assistance or support for mental health and wellbeing (Harvey et al., 2014). Additionally, quality professional learning is needed to help teachers address teacher-student conflict and to understand that persistently poor student behaviour is a possible indicator of deeper wellbeing problems, not just a cause for punishment.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR STAFF

There is strong evidence that the social and emotional learning skills that benefit students have value for teachers as well. A 2021 meta-analysis of 43 social and emotional learning trials involving over 3,000 teachers, found significant gains in social-emotional competence and improved teacher wellbeing, along with reductions in teacher psychological distress (Oliveira, Roberto, Pereira, Marques-Pinto, & Veiga-Simão, 2021). This suggests that an explicit focus on social-emotional wellbeing can deliver benefits both to the students who are the traditional targets of such interventions, and the teachers and staff who are engaged in the delivery of the intervention. Hence, whole-school social and emotional learning interventions that target both students and teachers are likely to be beneficial to the whole school.



Enable and sustain supportive leadership practices that build teacher wellbeing

NORMALISE POSITIVE AND SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP

As mentioned previously, supportive leadership practices are closely linked with teacher wellbeing (Collie et al., 2016). Effective and supportive leadership significantly reduces education job strain by helping individuals and organisations to cope with increased responsibilities and external pressures (Education Support, 2020).

Positive leadership approaches that help build psychological and social capital also promote wellbeing amongst employees (Luthans, Youssef, Sweetman, & Harms, 2012). Upon application, this involves “establishing goals and expectations and involving staff and others in the (leadership) process; strategic allocation of resources to make teaching goals a priority; planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; promoting and participating in both formal and informal teacher learning and development; and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment to protect time for teaching and learning” (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 22). Normalising the recognition and acknowledgement of the skills and abilities of teachers through collegial support and by leadership, enhances teachers’ self-efficacy and increases the likelihood they too will recognise and acknowledge student effort. (McCallum, 2021).

Supportive leadership practices need to be embedded across different levels of leadership and involve (Collie, 2021):

- Listening to teachers’ opinions and perspectives and providing choice and options based on their needs.
- Providing teachers with clear directions and guidance regarding their roles and expectations.
- Including teaching staff in decision making.
- Meeting with teachers regularly, providing support for professional development and mental health.

ENABLE MEANINGFUL CAREER GROWTH

The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (2020) highlighted four areas (in addition to appropriate recruitment) that school leaders need to address to enhance the wellbeing of teachers and other school staff. These areas include (Greany & Earley, 2021):

- Effective induction and mentoring throughout their career.
- Meaningful and impactful opportunities for professional learning.
- Positive working conditions and a school climate conducive to teacher wellbeing.
- Trust and respect.

School leaders also need to consider establishing policy that specifically addresses staff welfare and wellbeing, so the wellbeing of school staff and leaders is demonstrated in policy and practice. Importantly, these actions and others listed below enable all staff to conceptualise and proactively embed in their role caring for their own and other staff and students’ wellbeing.



Provide effective induction and mentoring, and meaningful professional learning that is sustained and authentic

EXPAND STAFF SELF-EFFICACY AND SKILLS

It is critical to enhance professional support for school leaders and staff, given it is a strong predictor of staff wellbeing and contributes to improved student learning and wellbeing.

The use of professional development, induction, mentoring, engagement in professional networks and professional supervision (facilitated reflection and coaching, as used for other frontline professions such as psychologists led by qualified professionals, not a line manager or supervisor) that enhances school leaders’ self-efficacy and coping skills, as well as high quality induction for newly appointed principals and other school leaders (Bermejo-Toro, Prieto-Ursúa, & Hernández, 2016), is vital to their wellbeing. It is also important to provide regular opportunities and time for school leaders to build and maintain professional informal and formal support networks.

EXTEND STAFF WORK CAPACITY AND PERCEPTION OF SUPPORT

In addition to supporting school leaders and staff to take action to improve their own work-life balance and wellbeing, it is important to support the skills necessary for school leaders and staff to increase their work capacity and their perception of support. Riley et al (2021, p. 12) suggest this professional learning needs to address the following issues:

- “Emotional aspects of teaching and learning.
- Organisational function impacting emotional labour.
- Managing workplace difficulties and conflicts.
- Employee assistance programs.
- Debriefing self and others.”

ENHANCE THE ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNGER STAFF IN THE SCHOOL

Because teachers' self-efficacy, confidence and job satisfaction are associated with effective practices, access to quality teaching resources, professional development, and peer collaboration (OECD, 2016) these need to form part of a school's strategic plan to support staff wellbeing. Early career teachers in particular require additional supports and mentoring to support their wellbeing and to develop their confidence in their teaching, to at least the end of their third year of teaching (Granziera & Perera, 2019). The New Zealand Primary and Area School Teachers' and Principals' Occupational Hauora / Health and Wellbeing Survey Report (2019) recommends three-years of extended induction release time for new teachers to reduce the typically high attrition, often related to wellbeing issues among second year teachers.

OFFER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THAT SUPPORTS STAFF WELLBEING

Explicit wellbeing-related professional learning for school leaders and other staff is essential to establish a culture that encourages the school community to support their own and others' wellbeing through mechanisms such as social and emotional capacity building for leadership/teaching, dealing with difficulties and conflicts in the workplace, using employee assistance programs and mental health first aid (Department of Education, 2020). Staff also need to be trained in trauma-informed education practices and inclusivity practices focussed on safe responses for higher-risk students.



Track wellbeing priorities and progress to benchmark, monitor and effectively meet the wellbeing strengths and needs of the school community

TRACK WELLBEING PROGRESS

All schools (and school systems) need to establish a common metric framework that can be used to track wellbeing. Regular ongoing collection of staff (and student) wellbeing data is important to benchmark, monitor and support a school's (and a system's) workforce to effectively meet future needs (Department of Education, 2020). It is also helpful to collect school process data that maps the wellbeing resources available to the school and current policy and practices, as well as how these are being used, against strategic wellbeing outcomes for the school to determine gaps. This mapping exercise can be compared to staff wellbeing outcomes to determine the relevant policies and actions needed, tailored to school staff and wellbeing resource strengths, and needs.

SHARE WELLBEING LEARNINGS

School staff will also benefit from 'communities of wellbeing practice' to grow staff capacity and provide opportunities to review exemplar policies and practices in schools with a strong school climate and wellbeing practices. Robust, ideally longitudinal, evidence helps to ensure the most efficacious wellbeing policies and practices for school leaders and staff are identified, widely adopted, and continue to be effective.



Advocate for government policy reform addressing staff workload, resourcing, and safety

IDENTIFY, REVIEW AND ADDRESS DRIVERS OF WORKLOAD INTENSIFICATION

The identification and monitoring of school leader and staff workload concerns are critical to effectively target and improve school resourcing, such as increased capacity to support students with complex needs and reduce non-teaching administrative tasks. The following actions were suggested by teachers as necessary to reduce their workload and challenges to their wellbeing (Heffernan et al., 2019, p. 14):

- "Trust teachers to do the job they have trained to do.
- Define clearly set working hours and consider what workload can be realistically achieved during those hours.
- Enable interagency and community cooperation to address systemic social issues that can't easily be addressed just by schools.
- Provide teachers with more time explicitly to undertake administrative work or reduce administrative burden.
- Provide all staff members ongoing training and support in behaviour management.
- Revise and streamline curriculum (to address overcrowded curriculum).
- Focus explicitly on teacher / staff wellbeing and sustainability and consider this in making policy decisions.
- Introduce fewer initiatives simultaneously – let people solidify their practices and work before bringing in the next idea.
- Ensure more secure career and employment pathways for beginning teachers.
- Improve public perceptions of teachers and teaching.
- Position teacher voice more clearly in decisions/policy making.
- Strive for less 'busy'-ness, and work towards having calmer schools, do fewer things and do them well".

FACILITATE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO TRAINED MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS IN ALL AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS TO RESPOND TO THE INCREASING COMPLEXITY OF STUDENT BEHAVIOUR AND MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING DIFFICULTIES

Ensuring schools have the resources and staff have the skills to address escalating behavioural and mental health issues of students is critical to establishing and maintaining the school community's mental health and wellbeing. The escalation of mental health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic, is stretching the already overburdened mental health services – particularly in rural and regional locations in Australia (Patton et al, 2021). As many parents lack the knowledge or skills to identify or address mental health concerns in their children, there is an expectation that schools have the skills and resources to intervene early or provide support.

Streamlining referral services and access to psychological services provided by qualified experts is essential to respond to needs of individual children in a timely and equitable

manner (Paton, Gillam, Warren, & Coghill, 2021). A submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System by the Victorian Branch of the Australian Education Union (2019) identified a significant gap in mental health services provided in Victorian public schools; expressing a "concern and frustration at the difficulty in accessing the support and services to meet the growing incidence of mental health issues amongst the students they educate" (Australian Education Union - Victoria Branch, 2019, p. 1). This Submission called for a 'Mental Health Service Guarantee' ensuring:

- "Availability of mental health services.
- Timely provision of mental health services.
- Ongoing provision of mental health services where required." (Australian Education Union - Victoria Branch, 2019, p. 2)

Further, the submission detailed schools' need for financial support to facilitate the provision of high-quality evidence-based mental health and wellbeing resources and professional development to support school leaders' and staff, as well as quality pre-service teacher training (Australian Education Union - Victoria Branch, 2019).

USE POLICY REFORM TO PROTECT SCHOOL LEADERS AND STAFF FROM THE IMPACT OF AGGRESSIVE AND OTHER OFFENSIVE BEHAVIOUR DIRECTED AT THEM

School leaders and staff must be protected from aggressive and other offensive behaviour from students, parents, and colleagues. Concerted government and system level reforms and effort are necessary to identify factors that contribute to and protect school leaders and staff from harm. Underlying issues are complex and while school leaders and staff can take action to reduce their risk, government and system level support is critical. Increased safety leads to significant improvements in school leaders' and staff wellbeing and contributes to significant wellbeing and achievement outcomes for students.

Given the targeting of school leaders and staff appears to have decreased during the enforced COVID-19 changes in schools, it may be opportune to identify and maintain actions that helped to safeguard the health and wellbeing of school leaders and staff (and students), such as reducing harmful face-to-face interactions between school leaders, staff, and parents. For example, online recorded meetings may

- a) help to reduce staff exposure to aggressive and offensive behaviour,
- b) increase scheduling opportunities for parents and school leaders/staff and
- c) reduce parent anxiety by removing the need "to sit outside the principal's office" (Riley et al., 2021).

Conclusion

School leader and staff wellbeing is critical to help students reach their full potential. Yet rarely in recent history has school leader and staff mental health and wellbeing been so tested as during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has further exposed the high rates of school leader and staff stress and exhaustion from the intensification of their frontline work supporting the health, development and learning of their students.

Governments, school systems and the community must act now to reduce the potential impact of 'long-COVID' on our school leaders, staff (and students') wellbeing. The wellbeing of members of the school community is so inextricably linked that it can form a virtuous or vicious cycle, whereby the wellbeing of each member in the school community affects the wellbeing of others resulting in a continuous process of wellbeing decline or improvement. System- and school-level actions must prioritise and monitor school leader and staff wellbeing, providing necessary school resources and sufficient staff capacity to support the complex needs of the school community; establishing a school culture that values and normalises respectful and positive relationships; and thereby reducing the harm from work overload and intensity on school leaders and staff.

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