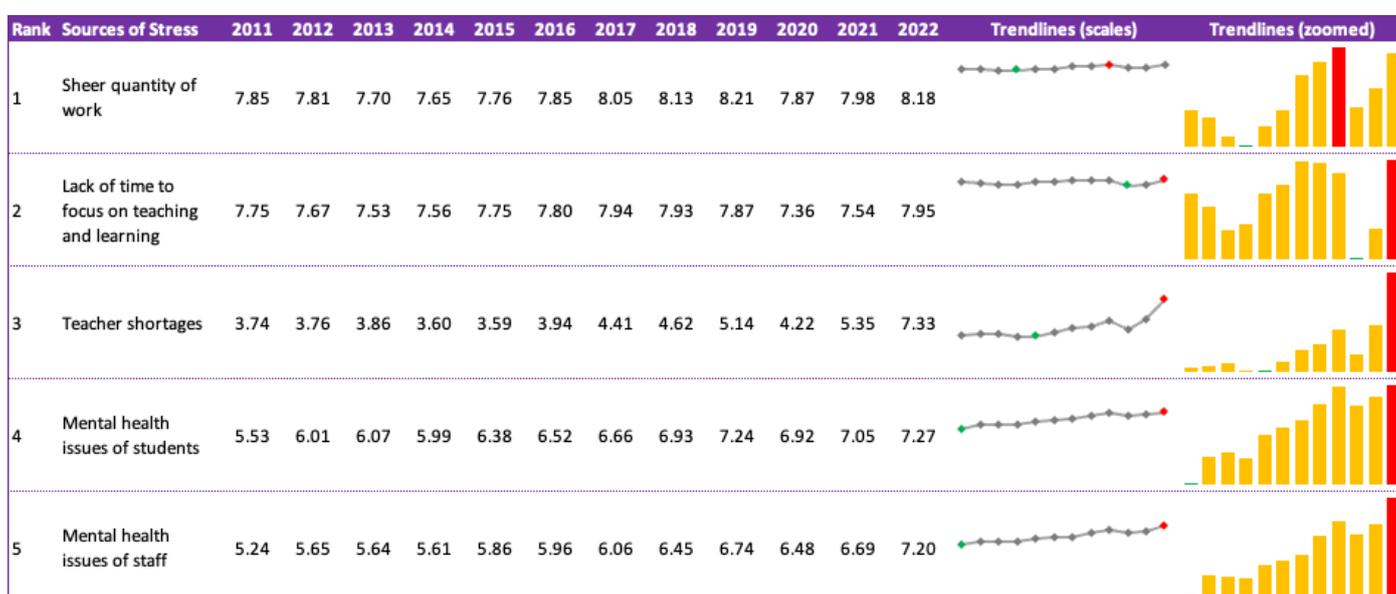


ACU research reveals acute warning signs for Australian school principals’ health, wellbeing, and longevity in the profession

The number of Australian school principals wanting to retire early or quit has tripled since 2019 with teacher shortages a major source of stress for school leaders, an exclusive look at early results of new Australian Catholic University research shows.

Heavy workloads and a lack of time to focus on the core responsibilities of teaching and learning were the top two sources of stress recorded among almost 2500 principals surveyed in 2022, according to the annual Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey to be released next month.

National teacher shortages ranked third – up from 12th compared with the 2021 survey results. Mental health issues among students and staff rounded out the top five sources of stress.



Principals were also concerned about the welfare of staff and students, with their top five concerns for staff being burnout, stress, anxiety, depression, and alcohol and/or drug use, while anxiety, school refusal, depression, stress, and self-harm were leading causes of concern for their students.

Figures compiled by ACU’s Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (IPPE) for the latest annual survey of Australian principals reveal 65 principals planned to quit or retire early in 2022 –more than triple the number in 2019.

ACU Investigator and former principal Dr Paul Kidson said while the raw number was low, the numbers represented a substantial increase which pointed to a worrying trend supported by the other findings.

“It is a drastic increase when you look at the whole picture,” Dr Kidson said. “Principals’ workloads, stress caused by issues including the national teacher shortage across public, Catholic, and independent schools, and demands outside the classroom have escalated to unsustainable levels.

“We are now seeing the cumulative impact of this on principals’ health and wellbeing, and we are very concerned about the increasing steepness of those trends as they are heading in a very distressing direction.

“This data shows serious dashboard warning lights flashing all over the place. These are warning signs that we have not seen so acutely before, and we have almost 2500 people saying the same thing.”

I am leaving earlier than expected due to stress, the sense of frustration at being moved away from educational leadership and into management conversations, parental concerns, staff fatigue and my own burnout.

- Female, combined Independent school, NSW

IPPE co-lead investigator and leading school wellbeing expert Associate Professor Theresa Dicke said the impact of wide-ranging stressors on school leaders, including ongoing teacher shortages, was becoming acute.

Heavy workloads and lack of time to focus on teaching and learning remained the top two sources of stress for principals in 2022. She said principals needed support to help reverse the concerning trends detected by the survey.

“The fact that these stressors remain the same as in 2021 indicates the level of importance in addressing these concerns,” she said. “We need to progress and implement effective solutions that support and empower principals in their vital roles.

“We have seen how education experts and political leaders can work collaboratively on solutions to the teacher shortage, and now we need to support our principals by heeding their serious and valid concerns.”

Sources of concern for staff:	2021 Ranking	2022 Ranking
Sheer quantity of work	1	1
Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning	2	2
Teacher shortages	12	3
Mental health issues of students	3	4
Mental health issues of staff	6	5

World leading educational psychologist and co-lead investigator Professor Herb Marsh said the feedback to IPPE investigators was bleak, with principals sacrificing their long-term health and wellbeing for jobs that inflicted extreme stress.

Professor Marsh said not only were principals dealing with the stresses of the job, but also carried the burden of significant concerns about the health and wellbeing of staff and students.

“It is really important to highlight principals are doing a great job, but we have concerns about the rate of escalation and the cumulation of the issues, and it is reasonable to conclude that this is compounding the challenges for school leaders,” Professor Marsh said.

“Our school leaders are clearly overburdened and struggling, the question remains how long can they keep going like this?”

Sources of concern for staff:	% selected
Burnout	98.3%
Stress	94.7%
Anxiety	82.8%
Depression	53.4%
Alcohol and/or drug abuse	7.9%

Sources of concern for students:	% selected
Anxiety	93.7%
School refusal	72.1%
Depression	47.1%
Stress	42.0%
Self-harm	41.6%

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