

Call for zero tolerance for violence against school leaders

The Western Australian Primary Principals' Association (WAPPA) is today launching a state-wide campaign calling for school principals and deputy principals to be included as public officers in existing State Government legislation to ensure protection and justice against the increasing number of physical assaults.

"I don't think that people realise that principals and deputy principals are eight times more likely to experience a violent assault than the general population. On behalf of our members I'm calling for a zero tolerance approach. Enough is enough," said WAPPA President, Stephen Breen.

"The State Government has legislation in which people who assault a public officer face a mandatory jail term. All it would take is the stroke of a pen to ensure that principals and deputy principals have the same protection as police officers, prison officers, Public Transport Authority security officers, ambulance officers, contract workers providing court security or custodial services, contract workers under the Prisons Act 1981 and youth custodial officers.

"The role of our school leaders must be respected by the community and they must be recognised for their work in supporting students, staff and communities. They're expected to continue to improve educational outcomes and maintain a positive school environment while many are actually feeling vulnerable and at risk of physical assault by a parent or community member, who might not face any consequences," said Mr Breen.

Research shows that the issue of increasing violence and threats of violence against school leaders is a state-wide issue. It isn't limited by geography or socio-economic demographics and is taking place in public and private schools.

"The lack of action by the authorities has adversely affected the quality and quantity of our educational leaders. Fewer teachers are aspiring to the role of school leader and without strong and credible leadership, educational outcomes may be negatively impacted," added Mr Breen.

Here are some of the stories of violence and abuse towards principals and deputy principals.

- » *"There are two fingerprint size marks on my neck, slowly fading but still visible and 12 plus months on they are a daily reminder of when one of our parents, a bipolar schizophrenic, physically assaulted myself and my deputy principal. The physical marks will fade but the incident, just one in many incidents at our school, is a daily reminder of one of the most disturbing and dangerous aspects of our profession, where dealing daily with high end incidents with parents and students are unfortunately a regular occurrence."*

- » *“Many female parents were very apologetic and sympathetic as they witnessed what occurred. They shared their own experiences with assault and likened my workplace violence to domestic violence. This was very confronting and disturbing to me as a female Principal.”*
- » *“This man was not a pretty sight – he was shirtless, had obviously been in a recent fight and had come out second best as he had a very swollen black eye and cuts on his face. I found out later the fight had involved his neighbour, his wife, a dog and a spear gun... But as usually happens with ice users, he was having none of this and my efforts to calm him were having the reverse effect. So I stopped talking and with his finger centimetres from my nose, listened to his abuse and description of how my face would look much worse than his.”*
- » *“As a direct result of the attack, I suffered facial bruising and lacerations after taking several blows to my face and chest. This resulted in physiotherapy for damage to my neck and shoulders from the impact of the blows. Ongoing, I have had issues with my sinus resulting in an operation. The initial physical impact of the attack affected me going out as normal. I avoided going out as I was embarrassed by my looks with the bruising to my face and chest”.*
- » *“The unprovoked serious parent physical assault I was a victim of was ongoing for approximately sixty minutes during a school day. As well as physical assault I and other staff were on the receiving end of verbal threats and obscene language. While we kept cool heads and tried in vain to defuse the parent's angry behaviour during this ordeal, we were very much conscious of the effect of this incident on everyone...Furthermore, while the offender was completing some of the anger management program he was further assaulting me via social media.”*

Associate Professor Phil Riley from the Australian Catholic University conducted a Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey in 2015. He said he's alarmed by the findings and believes that government, employers and the community all have a role to play in preventing assaults on school leaders

“This is beyond debate. If you value your local school and want it to be the best it can be for children, be part of the conversation to help stop this unacceptable behaviour,” Associate Professor Riley said.

The survey revealed that principals and deputy principals experienced a far higher prevalence of offensive behaviour, instigated by another adult, at work each year than the general population.

- » Violent assaults increased from 7 to 8 times the rate of that experienced by the general population.
- » Across Australia in 2014, more than 30% of principals and deputy principals experienced physical violence.

- » The prevalence of threats of violence in Western Australian schools was 43%, the highest since 2011.
- » Threats of violence against principals and deputy principals increased from 4.9 to 5.3 times higher than the general population.
- » Adult to adult bullying increased from 4.1 to 4.3 times higher than that experienced by the general population and 42% of principals and 52% of deputy principals reported that they were the subject of bullying.
- » The prevalence of violence in schools was similar in urban, suburban, rural and remote areas but was highest in large rural towns.
- » Stress was rated at 1.7 times more than the general population rate.
- » Sleeping troubles were reported at 2.2 times the general population rate.
- » Depressive symptoms for school leaders were recorded at 1.3 times the rate of the general population.

“I have met with a number of government representatives regarding this matter, and while I believe we have in-principle support, the necessary action has not yet been taken. WAPPA members will now be publicly calling for this protection,” said Mr Breen.

Members of the community are encouraged to sign the petition at <http://www.wappa.asn.au/petition> to show their support of a zero-tolerance policy on violence against school leaders.

“Respect starts at home and that’s why we’re calling on the people of Western Australia to support our principals and deputy principals and to send a strong message to our decision makers that workplace violence and intimidation are completely unacceptable.”

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