



Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy Discussion Paper

AEU RESPONSE

Introduction

The AEU welcomes the Department's initial efforts to address principal work, workload and the associated impacts on principal health and wellbeing. Our general concern with the Discussion Paper is that it does not broadly frame the work required of principals in both breadth and volume and as a consequence it does not adequately address the implications of this work and workload on principals. Principals have been indicating over a long period of time that there are two major sources of stress – the sheer quantity of management and compliance work which they are required to undertake and the lack of time to properly focus on their core role as educational leaders. These issues were identified in the 2004 Department of Education report *The Privilege and the Price* and subsequently in the Monash/ACU Principal Health and Well-being surveys, the 2016 ACER School Staff Workload Survey, and in the annual AEU State of Our Schools surveys.

Released in October 2016, the ACER School Staff Workload Survey indicated that the sources of stress for principals, as outlined above, have increased over the last few years leading to even more unsustainable workloads. Through the survey, principals reported that over the previous week (Monday to Sunday) they spent on average 60 hours on all school-related activities. When asked if their workload was 'manageable' only 18 per cent of primary principals and 25 per cent of secondary principals said often or always.

Of equal concern was that principals in both primary and secondary schools reported that they spent under 20 per cent of their time on curriculum and teaching-related tasks. When asked specifically if they spent "a reasonable amount of time leading teaching and learning at my school" only 22 per cent of primary principals and 39 per cent of secondary principals agreed with the statement. Research on effective schools emphasises the importance of the key educational leadership role of principals and this has been and continues to be frequently communicated to principals. The Department's frameworks and accountability processes, through which principals are held responsible for the educational outcomes of students, are many and varied, and include the Framework for Improved Student Outcomes, Annual Implementation Plans, whole school professional development plans, performance and development processes, and school reviews. Principals themselves clearly say that they want their role to have a greater focus on educational leadership rather than being overwhelmed by the workload generated by compliance and management. Through the ACER survey, almost 80% of principals indicated that the majority of

their work day is spent managing school administration requirements and that this burden has increased compared to the past.

The AEU considers that the Department's health and wellbeing strategy should have a range of improved approaches to aid the situation of individual principals. We broadly support the identification of further opportunities outlined in the Discussion Paper, including greater resourcing and support:

- at the beginning of a principal's tenure,
- to avoid personal and professional isolation,
- to access specialist services as needed,
- to ensure that principals can seek support for mental health and wellbeing issues without compromising their relationship with their Regional Director (and/or delegate),
- through professional development and training in mental health and wellbeing and developing leadership capabilities,
- for the implementation of new initiatives and other changes, and
- to monitor and manage workflow.

Beyond the worth of the above measures the Department's main focus should be on directly addressing the overarching issues which create stress and undermine health and wellbeing of principals. A genuine approach would be to identify tangible measures to narrow the range of work required of principals and reduce their workload. This can be the only proper starting point to address principal health and wellbeing. A pro-active and preventative approach is far more preferable to finding reactive mechanisms to deal with the problems once they are experienced. To that end, the AEU is strongly of the view that the majority of the issues confronted by principals that have a demonstrably negative impact on their wellbeing are preventable. It is a question of the system accepting responsibility for properly managing the working conditions of principals. The clear message from principals is that the primary cause of day-to-day workplace stress is an unmanageable workload, so concrete ways to reduce this should be front and centre in the health and wellbeing strategy. Unfortunately the Discussion Paper has little to say about this. Using the rhetoric of care and support is no substitute for real measures to improve the working environment.

The system needs to clearly identify and modify the policies and practices which impact on the workload of principals. As part of this it needs to take measures to change the balance in the principal's role between management/compliance and educational leadership. Being an effective educational leader means having the time and support to carry out this role.

The health and wellbeing strategy needs to have some clear markers about whether (and how) each of its proposals will reduce the quantity of work, and whether (and how) each proposal will enable principals to spend more time on what should be their core role – educational leadership.

The settlement of the *Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2017* commits DET and the AEU to find ways to resolve principal workload issues through a working party. The working party will identify support which is already available to principals and provide advice about how to make that support more accessible. Critically, the working party will identify additional support which is required by principals. We see this working party as having a key role in addressing many of the

matters raised in the Discussion Paper and those issues which the paper ignores including the reduction in principal workload overall.

Specific Comments on the Discussion Paper

1. Many of the current supports that DET have identified are passive in the sense that principals need to know about, and initiate the interaction, for example, by accessing the principals' page, HRWeb, and the OHS Advisory Service.

While having these resources is critical, the structures, processes and people who enact these supports need to be highlighted, otherwise the strategy reads as having the responsibility disproportionately resting on the individual employee. This is particularly pertinent for employees whose health and wellbeing is already compromised, as they are less likely to either search for or make use of supports provided in this way.

DET's response also needs to specifically address the needs of those leaders who are in acting positions, as these employees are often forgotten or excluded from supports provided to substantive principals. What can be systematically provided for acting principals, who, in our experience, have higher risks?

Overview

2. In the Overview section, there still seems to be a privileging of the cost and benefit to the system rather than an appropriate focus on the potential risks to an individual's health and the significant damage that can occur to individuals, their families, and colleagues.

Page 2 develop the skills and confidence of (not in) principals

Area of Focus 1

3. In Area of Focus 1 (p.5), mention is made that Bastow is developing an assessment process for principal readiness. This needs clarity as it is likely to be viewed as a mandated accreditation process and in fact may create barriers to employees who aspire or are considering becoming principals. The AEU has significant concerns about this approach and remains opposed without further detailed analysis being conducted and consultation into its appropriateness and impact.

Page 5 Organisational Design Guide – a useful resource, however there need to be improved processes to ensure that principals being aware of it and using it to their advantage.

Page 6 Acting principals – this cohort are particularly at risk. What formal supports can be provided for this group?

Page 7 The Discussion Paper appears to characterise the barriers to a culture of collaboration, including the "honest sharing of issues among principals", as

arising from the workforce only. Such an analysis ignores the structural elements, which provide a key foundation for workforce culture and behaviour. The primary structures, in this instance, are the devolved nature of the system and the per student competitive funding model.

Page 7 What explicit processes and structures are there in the regional forums to identify additional support for principals?

Area of Focus 2

4. The Discussion Paper refers to SEILs being “line managers” (p.8). SEILs are not a principal’s line manager, but rather the delegate of the Regional Director. There is a further reference to the SEILS as a role that supports principals on page 15. This apparent dual role continues to cause confusion and can negatively affect an individual’s health and wellbeing.

5. From our work with AEU members, the ‘What we heard’ sections are accurate representations of some principal concerns. There are instances however, where the ‘Work in progress’ does not match the descriptions in the ‘What we heard’ sections. One instance of this is on pages 8-9 of the Discussion Paper. In the ‘What we heard’ section, principals said that “good quality ‘just in time’ technical support can provide immediate relief from stressors” (p.8).

It does not appear that the ‘Work in progress’ section addresses what was heard. There does not seem to be any reference to technical support. This is critical if the concerns of principals are going to be addressed.

Page 9 There is a tension between the ‘What we heard’ section and the ‘What we currently do’ section. In the ‘What we heard’ section, it says “Some principals pointed out a reluctance to discuss wellbeing issues with their SEIL...”. In the ‘What we currently do’ section there is no acknowledgment of this.

Page 10 Is the Bastow ‘Principal Class Health and Wellbeing’ course about a principal’s own health and wellbeing or does it also address their role as a wellbeing leader?

Area of Focus 3

6. Area of Focus 3 whilst titled ‘Respectful and Inclusive School Communities’ seems only to be about disability and responses in this area.

Page 11 In the ‘What we currently do’ section, the reactive/responsive strategies should go after the proactive/preventative strategies. It reads as ‘risk mitigation’.

Page 12 ‘Research and analysis’ – there is mention that responses will be collated. How does the collation of these responses further support principals?

Area of Focus 4

7. General comments.

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| Page 14 | 'Work in progress' – are there any other ways that collaboration is occurring? |
| Page 16 | 'Work in progress' – is it a 'compliance checklist' or a recentralisation of the policy functions of DET? Is what is being created the same as it used to be? |