

Report reveals impact of Australian school crisis on principals

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26 May 2026

An annual Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey of school principals by the Australian Catholic University (ACU), its 15th yearly study since 2011, indicates the intolerable conditions in schools.

The survey's lead investigator, Professor Theresa Dickie, commented: "If we continue along this trajectory schools will spend more of their leadership capacity managing crisis and conflict, and less on building the conditions for high-quality teaching, staff development and student learning."

The 66-page report concludes that since 2011, the core focus of principals' work has "altered fundamentally" with "support for mental health concerns for students and teachers" emerging "as two of the most significant components." Yet the report makes no attempt to explain why or how this is happening.

The report's findings paint a grim picture of schools under immense strain:

- Principals are facing complex depression and anxiety disorders, with scores significantly higher than the general population.

- 45 percent triggered a "red flag" for risk of self-harm or serious occupational health problems, while more than half have seriously considered leaving their roles due to their working conditions.

- In 2025 nearly half of school leaders, 47.8 percent, reported being subjected to physical violence, almost double the number, 27.3 percent, in 2011. Those experiencing threats of violence, mostly by parents and students, increased to 53.7 percent in 2025, from 37.9 percent in 2011.

- Asked to rate their top concern regarding students, principals named the challenges experienced by students with neurological and complex conditions. Second on the list was students' mental health. Although sensationally headlined in the media, student behaviour issues ranked third.

- Regarding teachers, principals' chief concern was their excessive workload, with teachers' mental health rated as second.

The ACU report says nothing about the widening funding

gap between public and private schools.

Over 80 percent of disadvantaged students in Australia attend public schools, a proportion which is increasing. A 2025 article published in the *Educator* revealed that a quarter of public schools in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, were classified as "high concentration disadvantaged"—a number that had nearly doubled since 2017.

According to the Save Our Schools (SOS) website, research shows that disadvantaged students require double the average expenditure per student to bring them up to par.

Yet the income per student in public schools is 45 percent less than in private schools. In 2024, income per student in private schools was \$30,384, that in Catholic schools, \$20,926, while it was just \$20,916 in government schools.

This disparity is widening, with the Albanese government's May 12 budget increasing funding for private schools by 19.3 percent over the next four years, while federal funding for public schools will rise by just 18.4 percent, below the expected inflation rate.

Concentrations of disadvantage has resulted in public schools with classes of 30 students and above, many with special needs, along with staff shortages, including a critical deficit of experienced staff trained in assisting students with complex learning needs.

In its submission to a 2024 Senate inquiry, the NSW Secondary Principals['] Council pointed to "staff shortages and staff teaching out of their field of expertise," "collapsed classes," the lack of "timely and purposeful support for disability, mental health issues and family dysfunction" and unmet student need for "food, housing and safety."

A 2024 *Guardian* article reported that children with disabilities at wealthy fee-paying schools are receiving up to 6 times the government support funding as those at public schools. One private school in Melbourne, Mooroolbark Grammar, received an average of \$16,000 for each student receiving the federal government's "student with disabilities" payment. The average for each student in the NSW public system was \$2,600.

Scattered throughout the 2025 ACU report are hopeful comments from principals that bringing together and documenting damning evidence would force politicians to act.

In reality, education policy is driven by corporate and state strategic aims. Decisions about funding, staffing and curricula are not based on social need. The construction of a two-tier school system meets the demands of business and the political establishment, with the majority of working-class students channelled into low-wage employment.

The report's recommendations, like those of the 2024 Senate inquiry, called for improved teacher training and for students to undergo specific lessons on how to behave. This directs responsibility onto school leaders and parents, and away from the culpable governments. It promotes the notion that principals can solve structural problems through better leadership, such as safety management, comprehensive reporting and response procedures.

The report cites as a significant step the \$100 million each of the country's largest states, NSW, Victoria and Queensland has pledged to deal with these problems. This paltry amount, roughly \$40,000 for each school, is insufficient to employ one full-time educator per school.

Recommendations to "increase support staff: provide administrative and specialist personnel to redistribute the work of the administrative workload" and "expand access for mental health services" serve to cover up ongoing government cuts. The Albanese government's budget featured the gutting of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), the largest single cut to a government program in Australian history. Schools will be severely impacted as the responsibility for caring for tens of thousands of students on the NDIS will be shifted to them.

The ACU report endorses a punitive and exclusionary move by the Victorian state Labor government that empowers principals to ban parents, carers or other adults from school grounds.

According to Psych4Schools, however, parent anger often stems from fear over their child's future, academic performance, bullying, safety, and miscommunication of school policies.

An Australian Council of State School Organisations submission to the 2024 Senate inquiry revealed that more than 80 percent of parents were concerned about their children's mental health and well-being and pointed to a three-year wait before a child could access a paediatrician for diagnosis and treatment.

A Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion submission to that inquiry reported that students with a disability in that state received between 46–48 percent of all short-term suspensions and between 41–47 percent of all long-term

suspensions between 2016 and 2020, despite making up only 17 percent of the student population. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students received about a quarter of all suspensions and exclusions despite constituting around 10 percent of the student population.

It is not difficult to see parents, frustrated by the lack of support their child is receiving, blaming school employees, as governments gag teachers speaking out publicly and trade unions block industrial action, which only further undermines public education.

As the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network, has documented and explained, the roots of school violence lie in the social structure and political system of capitalism. Working-class families are struggling to survive and make ends meet; educators are under intense pressure from governments for "improved test results," while the world outside the classroom explodes into ongoing war and genocide.

Labor and the union apparatuses defend the interest of capitalism, not the working class. That is why the CFPE calls for the building of new organisations completely independent of them. Educators, parents and students have to form rank-and-file committees that can exchange information and develop a program of action fighting for free, high quality public education for all.

To contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

X/Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)

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