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Attracting and Retaining Australia's Principals

Executive Summary

This research project focuses on issues of attraction and retention in relation to Australian principals. The project was developed in response to serious concerns about a crisis in principal health and wellbeing, against a backdrop of looming shortages and attrition of principals in Australia. Similar issues are echoed around the world, leading this research to meaningful implications for schooling systems and leaders worldwide.

The research sought perspectives from **current, former, and aspiring principals**. Key findings are presented below. It is important to note that one key finding is the lack of a clear picture at a national and state/territory level regarding the scale and scope of the problem of attraction and retention. Focus group experts noted that each state/territory 'counts' teachers differently (i.e., they reported that some states include registered teachers in their workforce numbers, which skews the issue of workforce supply and shortages as those teachers may never intend to work again). Focus group participants suggested that politics are getting in the way of having a clear understanding of the scale of the issue, as well as the development of strategies to address the issue. They suggested that no state or territory wants to be the first to clearly state the scale of the problem of principal shortages and burnout. **A fundamental finding of this project is therefore that clear and transparent data needs to be gathered about issues of principal attraction and retention, including 'pipeline' data such as middle leaders and aspiring leaders.**¹

Principal Attraction and Recruitment

- The research explored **barriers** towards people applying for principal positions. These barriers included:
 - Concerns about the **workload and emotional intensity** involved in the principalship
 - Concerns about the **impact of the principal role** on leaders' own health, wellbeing, and families / relationships
 - Concerns about the all-encompassing nature of the principalship
 - Barriers in identification and recruitment, including **gender and equity issues, 'inner circle' networks**, and adequate preparation and training to take on the role
- The research explored **motivations** for people aspiring to the principalship. These included:
 - Opportunities to develop, nurture, and support teachers
 - Opportunities to lead change and develop positive school cultures
 - Opportunities to make a difference and help young people reach their potential
- The research highlighted a concerning trend in a **lack of applicants** for principal positions (issues raised included number of applicants, as well as suitability of applicants)
- The research sought **advice for aspiring leaders** from experienced principals. They described the importance of having a supportive and trusted mentor, having a clear understanding of the challenges and realities of the role before taking it on, and having a strong sense of self before becoming a principal.

Principal Retention

- The research explored the **reasons principals leave the role early**. These reasons included:
 - A sense of a lack of support from systems, senior leaders, and policymakers
 - The effects of the role on their health and wellbeing

¹ The complexity of this issue is that each state and territory is responsible for education in its own jurisdiction, making a coordinated national approach particularly challenging. However, focus group participants suggest that until a clear picture of the issue is evident across jurisdictions, the scale of the challenges of attracting and retaining principals will remain opaque. A national approach could also ensure sharing of effective strategies and programs to attract, support, and retain leaders in the profession.

- An increasing focus on compliance and risk-management, which takes them from their core purpose of leading education
- The research explored **principals' perspectives on workload**. They described:
 - Not just a high volume of work, but an intensity in relation to the type of work being required
 - Significant impacts on health, wellbeing, work-life balance, and principals' families
 - A heavy focus on compliance and reporting, and highly bureaucratised systems which put an additional burden of work onto schools and principals
 - A need to revise the legal responsibilities and delegations within schools so that principals can share accountabilities and work appropriately (for example, with other school leaders or with business managers)
- The research asked what would have made principals **remain in the role for longer**. Responses included:
 - More support for principals
 - More focus on education and less on compliance and accountability
 - If their health had not been impacted by the work

What Principals Want Systems and Policymakers to Know

- The research asked principals what they wanted to **tell system leaders and policymakers**. Their responses included:
 - A need for **meaningful and targeted support** and help for school leaders
 - A consistent theme that principals do not feel trusted by increasingly risk-averse systems, and that this is stifling their ability to undertake their work
 - The importance of raising the status of principals' roles, and recognising the deeply complex work they undertake each day

Research Design

Fieldwork for the project was undertaken between May 2021 – May 2022. The research was supported by a scan of the literature and policy in this space.

Research methods included an anonymous online survey (149 respondents), followed by interviews with current, former, and aspiring principals (8) and focus groups with Principals' Association Executives (3 groups) designed to gather illustrative data and receive feedback on initial findings. Please refer to Appendix A, B, and C for more detail on the research methods and on respondent demographics.

Recommendations for Action

Attraction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop contextually relevant principal preparation programs. These should include targeted formal approaches and opportunities for identification, development, and support into the role – these programs need to consider diversity of applicants and move beyond informal networks that raise equity issues. 2. Develop and invest in formal mentoring programs for aspiring principals. These programs should include release time for identified and experienced principals to be trained and supported to act as mentors, including specific time for shadowing and mentoring. Mentoring programs should consider long-term succession planning and workforce strategy for targeted positions in schools which experience high rates of turnover and shortages of applicants.
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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Develop a national campaign to recognise the complexity and importance of school leaders' and teachers' work. The status of the profession is frequently cited as a concern for those working in schools. Principals and teachers cite a perceived lack of political and public support as a barrier towards attraction as well as retention. 4. Work with national and state Principals' Associations to develop and lead high-quality induction programs for new principals. These programs should be grounded in contemporary research into the work of educational leaders and ideally developed in partnership with research experts.
Retention	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Support meaningful workload reduction efforts led by principals. These could have a national and state/territory focus. The same issues are evident across Australia, though they require localised contextual responses. A sustained cross-system, cross-sector effort towards these changes is a critical first step towards meaningfully reducing workload. 6. Invest in mental health and wellbeing support for principals. Principals have cited the need for proactive support rather than reactive support. Some states/territories are trialling effective approaches towards this with great success (for example, Peer Clinical Supervision groups in Victorian public schools). 7. Redefine the role and position description of the principal to clarify and sharpen the focus and purpose (including considering redistributing accountability and delegations). 8. Realign system and school balance towards proactive support for principals, rather than monitoring and compliance. This would work towards addressing concerns from principals about a lack of trust from risk-averse systems. 9. Work with Principals' Associations around the country to develop high-quality leadership development programs for principals at different stages of their careers. This recognises the different needs principals have at different career stages – e.g., beginning, mid-career and end of career (recognising that principals have significant knowledge and expertise at this stage of the career, providing them opportunities to 'give back' to the profession). As with Recommendation 4, this should be grounded in contemporary research about educational leadership and could be designed and delivered in partnership with education researchers.
Other	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Develop a clear and transparent approach towards measuring data associated with attraction and retention (e.g., number of applicants per position, turnover rates, aspiring leader statistics). Without a clear understanding of the scope and scale of the issues associated with attraction and retention, it is unlikely that meaningful systemic change will be effective.

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- Tasmanian Principals' Association
- Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association
- Australian Capital Territory Principals' Association

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Principal Attraction and Recruitment	1
Principal Retention.....	1
What Principals Want Systems and Policymakers to Know	2
Research Design	2
Acknowledgements	4
Introduction and Background	6
Research Questions.....	7
Principal Attraction and Recruitment	8
Barriers Towards Attraction and Recruitment	9
Barriers Relating to Principal Health and Wellbeing	9
Work-Related Barriers	10
Pragmatic Barriers	10
Support for Aspiring Principals	10
Why do Aspiring Principals Want to Work in Specific Contexts?	11
Advice for Aspiring Principals from Current and Former Principals	12
Principal Retention	13
Why principals leave the role	13
Principals' Descriptions of the Challenges of their Work.....	14
Principal Workload.....	16
Possible Retention Factors (“I would have stayed in the principalship longer if...”).....	17
Rewards, Motivation, and Retention Factors.....	17
What Principals want Systems and Policymakers to Know	19
Appendix A: Research Design and Methods	20
Surveys	20
Interviews.....	20
Focus Groups	20
Appendix B: Survey Questions	21
Appendix C: Respondent Demographics [Survey Only]	22

Introduction and Background

Principals around Australia are in crisis. There are serious concerns about principal health and wellbeing, evidence of the intensification and extension of principals' work into their personal time, and an increasing shortage of people aspiring to the role. Longitudinal research has shown an ongoing crisis in principal health and wellbeing. Principals report increased exposure to experiences of harassment, abuse, and violence in the course of their work.² For example, days lost in Victorian schools to mental health injuries are 55% higher for principals than other school staff.³ 30% of Australian principals who completed the annual Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey in 2020 received a 'red flag' email, indicating that they were at serious risk on indicators relating self-harm, quality of life, or occupational health.⁴ The average cost of a mental health injury claim for a principal over a three-year period in Victoria is \$103,000 per claim.⁵

The **costs** of principal turnover are significant, and likely to have the most serious impact on vulnerable communities and students. The **indirect costs** of principal turnover are most evident in disadvantaged and marginalised school communities, which experience higher rates of principal turnover.⁶ Principal turnover has been shown to result in higher rates of teacher turnover, and has negative consequences for student achievement, and community engagement.⁷ Principal turnover also has effects on long-term school improvement efforts. For example, a change of principal can slow down ongoing strategic work and potentially result in a change of direction when a new leader is appointed. There are **direct costs** of principal turnover which are estimated at between \$45,000 and \$75,000 per principal – these estimates vary but can include the cost of advertising, appointing, and inducting principals into the role.⁸

This project arose from previous research undertaken in a partnership between the Australian Secondary Principals' Association and Dr Amanda Heffernan (The University of Manchester / Monash University). In 2020, we reported on the findings of a national study into principal autonomy and accountability.⁹ Findings of our study revealed major concerns about principal wellbeing, principal workload, and principals' perspectives about how long they could see themselves remaining within the role. This project was developed to further investigate principals' experiences and perspectives regarding issues of attraction and retention to the profession. The report is based largely on an anonymous online survey which was completed by current, aspiring, and former principals in Australian schools. Further data were generated through Interviews with current, aspiring, and former principals, as well as Focus Groups with Principals' Association executive members.

It is important to note in the context of these findings that the principals who responded to this survey are **not disaffected**. They were clear, open, and honest about the challenges faced in their work, as well

² DeWiele, C. E. B. (2021). Principals' experiences of mistreatment in the school environment. In *Global perspectives on microaggressions in schools: Understanding and combating covert violence* (pp. 9-28). Routledge.

³ Victorian Department of Education and Training. (2017). *Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy: Discussion Paper*. Retrieved from https://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/Documents/PrincipalHWBStrategy_DiscussionPaper.pdf

⁴ Riley, P. et al. (2021). *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey, 2020 Data*. Retrieved from https://www.principalhealth.org/reports/2020_AU_Final_Report.pdf

⁵ Victorian Department of Education and Training. (2017). *Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy: Discussion Paper*. Retrieved from https://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/Documents/PrincipalHWBStrategy_DiscussionPaper.pdf

⁶ B'eteille, T., Kalogrides, D., & Loeb, S. (2012). Stepping stones: Principal career paths and school outcomes. *Social Science Research, 41*(4), 904–919.

⁷ Kelchtermans, G. (2017). 'Should I stay or should I go?': unpacking teacher attrition/retention as an educational issue. *Teachers and Teaching, 23*(8), 961-977.

⁸ Boyce, J., & Bowers, A. J. (2016). Principal turnover: Are there different types of principals who move from or leave their schools? A latent class analysis of the 2007-2008 schools and staffing survey and the 2008-2009 principal follow-up survey. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 15*(3), 237-272; Snodgrass Rangel, V. (2018). A review of the literature on principal turnover. *Review of Educational Research, 88*(1), 87-124.

⁹ Heffernan, A., & Pierpoint, A. (2020). *Autonomy, accountability, and principals' work: An Australian Study*. Australian Secondary Principals' Association.

as the joys and rewards of the principalship. When asked if they find their work rewarding, the vast majority responded that they do. However, qualitative survey responses and focus groups reflected that while the work is rewarding, it is extremely challenging and increasing in intensity over time.

Meaningful steps must be taken towards reducing the burden of compliance and workload so that principals are able to focus on the work that reflects the reasons they entered the role – leading teaching and learning, supporting and developing teachers, and helping young people to realise their potential.

Research Questions

This research was guided by the following three questions:

RQ1: What are the current influences on principal attraction and recruitment?

RQ2: What are the current influences on principal turnover intention?

RQ3: How can we strengthen principal retention?

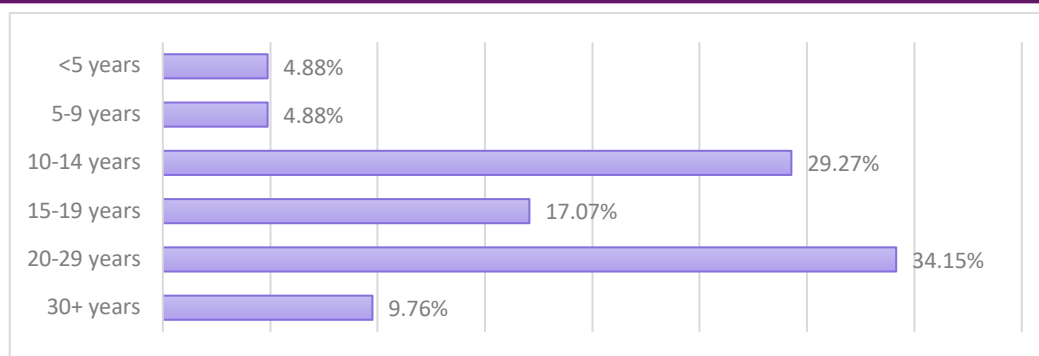
Principal Attraction and Recruitment

Motivations for Aspiring to the Principalship

Respondents were asked to describe their reasons for aspiring to take on the principal role.

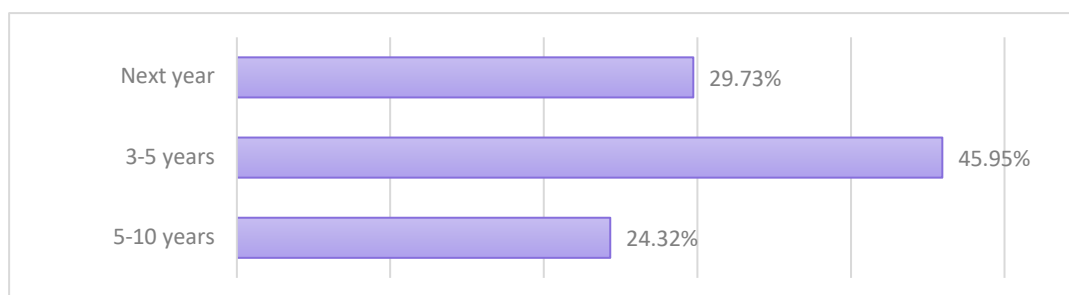
As expected, their responses revealed similar motivations to those identified throughout the educational leadership literature.¹⁰ Respondents described wanting to:

- Lead change and improvement
- Develop teachers' capacity and confidence
- Develop a strong school community and shape a positive school culture
- Support young people to navigate a changing world
- Help young people realise their potential
- Positively influence broader education structures and systems (including expressing frustration with current experiences and seeking to make a positive difference to these processes)
- Take on the role as a natural next step in their career progression



Aspiring Principal respondents were largely experienced middle leaders with more than 10 years' experience.

Figure 1: Aspiring Principal Respondents' Experience



When participants intend to apply for a Principal position

Figure 2: Aspirant Intentions to Apply

¹⁰ See, for example: Weiner, J. M., & Holder, S. (2019). Why lead?: Using narrative to explore the motivations of those aspiring to be principals in high needs schools. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 22(5), 555-572.

Principal Shortages

Focus Group interviews revealed increasing trends of principal shortages across Australia.

Jobs that would previously have had large numbers of applicants are now not receiving a single application. Participants are frequently seeing one or two applicants per job.

They report that few middle leaders want to take on the stress, emotional toll, and intensity of the principalship for only a slight increase in pay.

Barriers Towards Attraction and Recruitment

Respondents were asked whether they have hesitations about taking on the principalship, and what the causes for their concerns were. Their responses are provided below in overarching themes.

Barriers Relating to Principal Health and Wellbeing

- Respondents raised concerns about workload, describing it as a 24/7 job. They raised concerns about the impact on work/life balance, and the impact on their families due to the intensity of the role
- Respondents described a great deal of stress as being associated with principals' work. One respondent described knowing four colleagues who developed PTSD as a result of their work as principals
- Respondents were reluctant to work with challenging parents
- Respondents frequently raised concerns about principal wellbeing
- There was evidence in responses of a **perceived lack of support** from systems, system leaders, communities, and the wider public
- Principals' salary is not seen as commensurate with the increased responsibility & emotional toll required when taking on the role
- Aspirants see the emotional toll and labour involved in the principalship and do not want to take it on. They frequently noted the high levels of stress in the leaders they work with now.

Gender and Equity Barriers

- Respondents raised consistent **concerns regarding gender and equity of access to promotional opportunities**
- Their concerns included the impact of the "boys' club" and networks as a barrier for women to access and be supported in promotional opportunities
- While specific gender issues were raised by women aspirants, the impact of 'in group' networks on identification, recruitment, and appointment was also raised by a number of respondents, regardless of gender. This reflects previous research about 'homosociability' (people hiring people who consciously or subconsciously remind them of themselves) and in-group access regarding who gets to be seen as being a potential leader, and who gets opportunities to lead schools¹¹

¹¹ Research has previously explored these issues in recruitment and hiring processes. See, for example:

Blackmore, J., Thomson, P., & Barty, K. (2006). Principal selection: Homosociability, the search for security and the production of normalized principal identities. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 34(3), 297-317

James, C., Fitzgerald, S., Fellows, T., Goodall, J., Batlle, I. C., & Jones, J. (2019). Primary school headteacher recruitment and selection in England: The processes and the problematic aspects. *School Leadership & Management*, 39(5), 478-495

Steed, K., De Nobile, J., & Waniganayake, M. (2021). Promotion to leadership, not just merit, but insider knowledge: What do school principals say?. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, 36(1), 1-21.

- Aspirants raised concerns about barriers in relation to their other responsibilities including **family and caring responsibilities**. It should be noted that the majority of these respondents were women¹²
- Women referred to ‘imposter syndrome’ as a barrier to seeking promotion to the principalship. This concept, while widely understood, places responsibility onto women for ‘fixing’ or adjusting themselves to fit within systems. These systems are not traditionally built to support women in roles which are incompatible with caring responsibilities still largely held by women today.¹³

Work-Related Barriers

- A key barrier for respondents was the *type* of work now expected of principals. Aspirants were reluctant to take on a role that is increasingly perceived as being largely about compliance and accountability
- Aspirants described ‘hyper-bureaucratic systems’ seemingly stopping leaders from being able to achieve their core purpose of focusing on teaching and learning and working with young people. There was a perception drawn from interviews and focus groups that this education-focused strategic work can be more effectively undertaken in middle leadership roles.

Pragmatic Barriers

- A final category of barriers for aspirants were more pragmatic concerns. For example, some respondents intended to wait until they had undertaken formal preparation (including study, professional learning, or principal preparation programs)
- Another barrier for respondents was concerns about the location of jobs. Respondents were either limited to specific regions due to family commitments or preferred to wait for opportunities to work in particular areas.

Support for Aspiring Principals

Aspiring principals were asked what types of support they had access to, including mentors or support networks.

A consistent theme was the importance of having a trusted and effective mentor. Only around half of the aspirant respondents had a mentor, and those who did not, expressed their disappointment and concern that they did not have such a relationship.

¹² Research has provided evidence of the impact of caring responsibilities largely on women’s careers. See, for example: King, T., Hewitt, B., Crammond, B., Sutherland, G., Maheen, H., & Kavanagh, A. (2020). Reordering gender systems: can COVID-19 lead to improved gender equality and health?. *The Lancet*, 396(10244), 80-81.

¹³ Samtleben, C., & Müller, K. U. (2022). Care and careers: Gender (in) equality in unpaid care, housework and employment. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 77, 100659.

Sullivan, C. (2015). ‘Bad Mum Guilt’: The representation of ‘work-life balance’ in UK women’s magazines. *Community, Work & Family*, 18(3), 284–298.

Why do Aspiring Principals Want to Work in Specific Contexts?

Aspiring principals were asked whether they were drawn to particular contexts to work in, and why. Recurring themes within their responses were:

- Most respondents want to work in schools where they feel they can make the biggest difference
- Many respondents described the way their own backgrounds influence their aspirations, for example: coming from a low-SES background, a marginalised community, or a rural or remote community. These respondents described wanting to give back and provide similar opportunities to these communities
- Some respondents wanted to work in smaller schools where they could get to know and connect with everyone in the school community
- There were a number of barriers for aspirants regarding moving to a rural or remote setting. Respondents described family commitments in the city, but a recurring theme across a number of different questions was that they no longer trust that they could return 'home' after rural service. Respondents shared a number of examples of stories of people who were unable to return home and either relinquished their job or had to prolong their return home, subsequently missing key milestones for families (deaths, births, early years of children or grandchildren's lives, and so on). **This is potentially a significant barrier for many aspiring leaders.** Strategies to deal with this would need to balance the need to attract principals to rural schools alongside the need for rural locations to have leaders who would stay longer-term and be able to lead a sustained strategic agenda over time (i.e., 'FIFO' principals, or very short-term appointments would not be an appropriate solution)
- A small number of respondents described making decisions based on their own health and wellbeing, for example, preferring to work in more advantaged schools or 'leafy green' locations where they perceived that the work would possibly have less impact on their health and wellbeing.

Advice for Aspiring Principals from Current and Former Principals

Current and former principal respondents were asked what advice they would offer to aspiring principals. Their responses are provided grouped into themes below.

- Relationships being critical and central to the principalship
- Aspiring principals needing to go in with their eyes open – this included being clear about the realities of the job before taking it on, and thinking carefully if it is really what aspirants want to do
- A strong recommendation was that aspiring principals should develop their experience in small increments – take on increasingly more responsibility and learn as much as possible at each level, rather than promoting too quickly. There was a perception from interviews and focus groups that this is a recipe for ill-health and burnout, when new principals are not sufficiently experienced and equipped to take on the role and the challenges it brings each day¹⁴
- Principals strongly advised aspirants and new principals to be willing to ask for help when it is needed. They advised on the importance of developing strong support networks, including finding and building relationships with mentors
- Principals note that “you can’t do [the job] alone”
- Principals described the positive effects of shadowing and learning from experienced principals in either formal programs (i.e., Victoria’s Unlocking Potential Principal Preparation Program or Queensland’s Take the Lead) or doing this through informal networks (although it should be noted again that equity of access was previously described by respondents in this study as a barrier in informal networks)
- Principals advised aspirants of the importance of knowing their ‘moral purpose’; their reasons for undertaking this important work
- Principals advised aspirants to most importantly have an understanding of themselves – advice included ‘know yourself’, being aware of one’s own strengths and weaknesses, and having a strong sense/understanding of their own emotions
- Finally, Principals advised aspirants to focus on their own health from the start (with some using the ‘oxygen mask’ metaphor, in which airplane passengers should secure their own safety before helping others).

Would current and former principals recommend the role to others? Why or why not?

- ✓ + rewarding work
+ get to make a difference
+ get to lead change
+ get to shape a better future
- ✗ - demands don’t reflect the salary
- poor work/life balance
- too many sacrifices required for own family



Image from UnSplash

¹⁴ In our previous presentations and research, we have described this as ‘acclimatising’ to leadership, not unlike the small increments, preparation, and time involved in climbing a tall mountain and spending time acclimatising along the journey. Leaders in our research projects have described principals having the most chance of thriving when they have had opportunities to learn the hidden rules of the principalship along the way – see, for e.g., Heffernan A., & Pierpoint, A. (2019). *Autonomy, Accountability, and Principals’ Work: An Australian Study*. Australian Secondary Principals’ Association.

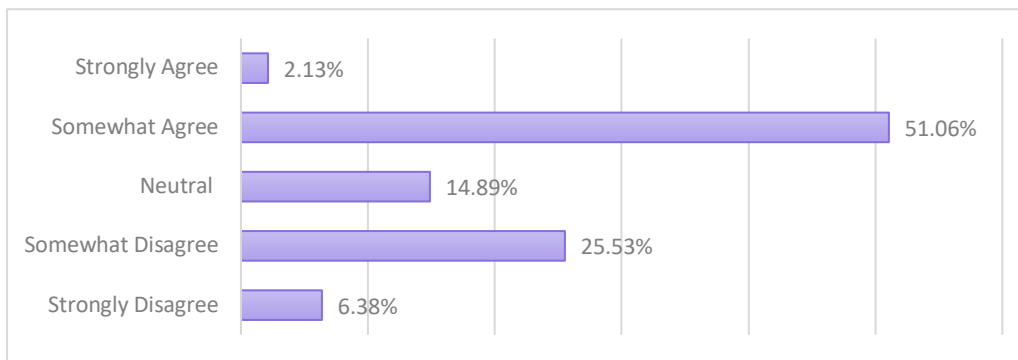
Principal Retention

This section reports on findings from Current and Former principal respondents. These respondents had significant experience across a broad range of contexts. **Of the 'former' principals, only 23% left the role due to retirement.** The others left before retirement age, with many of their reasons outlined below.

Why principals leave the role

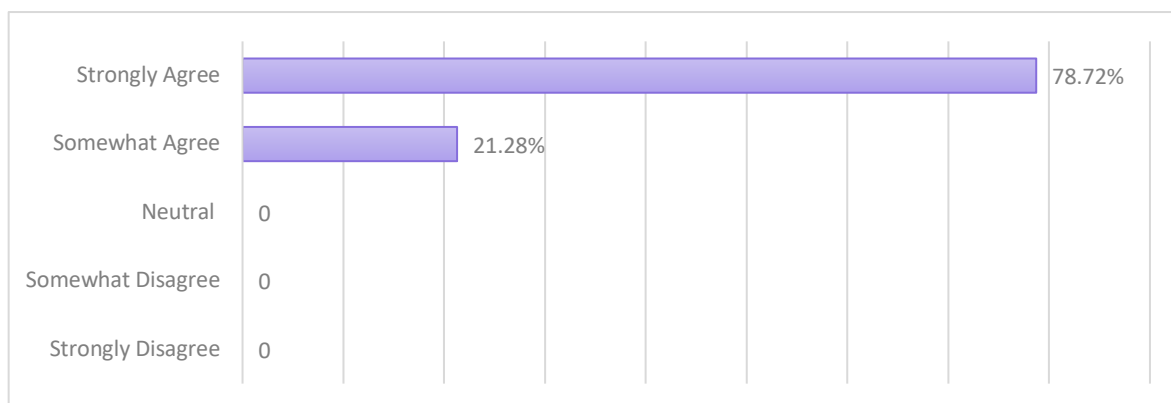
Former principals were asked to elaborate on why they left the role. Their responses included:

- Other opportunities (i.e., promotion into senior leadership roles, regional or central offices, or taking new pathways such as becoming coaches or academics)
- Respondents described leaving the role due to ill health (including physical and mental health), many of whom specifically described the role as exacerbating or causing these health concerns
- The complexity of the role contributed to some former principals leaving, with a recurring theme of being 'unable' to continue doing the work
- Some principals left due to family commitments (including caring for children or elderly parents)
- A final recurring theme in respondents' reasons for leaving the role was 'politics', or interference in principals' work by politicians, policymakers, senior leaders, and 'bureaucrats'.



Current Principals' responses: 'I am supported in my work'

Figure 3: Perceptions of Support



Current Principals' responses: "I find my work as a principal to be challenging"

Figure 4: Perceptions of Challenge

Principals' Descriptions of the Challenges of their Work¹⁵

Principals were asked to elaborate on their thoughts of the challenges of their work. The responses were consistent across current and former respondents, but it is important to note that a number of former principals suggested that the role has continued to grow in depth, complexity, and intensity since they were working.

Challenges of the principalship include:

- One of the most significant themes to recur within these comments was a sense of a lack of **trust** in principals and schools. This is drawn from a sense that principals increasingly have to undertake compliance work to satisfy risk-averse systems that do not start from a position of trust or assuming the best of people in the role, or in schools more widely. This results in what participants described as high levels of mandated reporting, training, multiple methods and types of reporting the same thing to different people, and an overload of pre-emptive work to avoid any possible perception of wrongdoing
- Significant administrative loads including particularly heavy workloads caused by **compliance and accountability requirements**, exacerbated by principals being the sole accountable officer for the vast majority of aspects of the school (meaning they are legally unable to delegate these tasks to other accountable officers)
- Workload – breadth, complexity, scope, and range of the types of work expected of principals today
- Descriptions of **'constant stress'**, as well as emotionally intense and draining work
- Complex staffing issues; including managing and supporting teachers experiencing stress and burnout; managing the practicalities and fallout of teacher shortages, managing difficult dynamics among staff members
- Lack of sufficient resourcing (trying to do more with less)
- **Increasingly complex issues** in schools and an expectation that they will be managed by schools (alongside continuously under resourced community and government support services for young people and communities)
- An increase in external accountabilities and policies that direct principals' work from a distance, taking them away from their core focus of 'giving the gift of education to young people' (in the words of a participant in our previous research)
- The **loneliness and isolation** that can come with being a principal
- Challenging relationships with staff, community members, and wider school systems
- Dealing with constant change, relentless efforts towards improvement, which results at times in an inability to cement good practice before moving on to the next focus
- A final challenge of a **lack of support** (including descriptions of lacking sufficient support, targeted support, meaningful support, appropriate support) for principals. Issues were raised regarding supervisory systems and practices, the types of support that *are* offered being insufficient or reactive rather than proactive, and challenges associated with finding the time to access or identify the types of support that is going to be of use to a principal.

"Our job has always been busy. This is different."

Focus Group participants reflected that the issue is not just in the volume of work. It is also in the **intensity**, the **emotional toll**, the **types** of work expected of them, and the **lack of support** they feel.

¹⁵ When asked if they found their work as a principal to be challenging, all principals selected only 'Strongly Agree' or 'Somewhat Agree' – Neutral, Somewhat Disagree, and Strongly Disagree were not selected by any respondents. See Figure 4 for more.

These challenges can be examined alongside responses from participants about how long they intend to remain within the role which highlights concerns about **retention**. 40% of respondents intend to remain in the role for up to the next 5 years; with a further 17% intending to leave the role in the next 10 years, meaning almost 6/10 respondents are looking to leave the role within the next decade.

Further, issues of **attraction** are of concern, with principals being largely unsure about whether they would recommend the role to others. 38% of principals were neutral (might or might not recommend the role), while a further 43% of principals responded that they would 'probably' (28%) or 'probably not' (15%). This reveals important insights into the current ambivalence about the role, with **only 19% of principals 'definite' that they would recommend others to take on the principalship.**

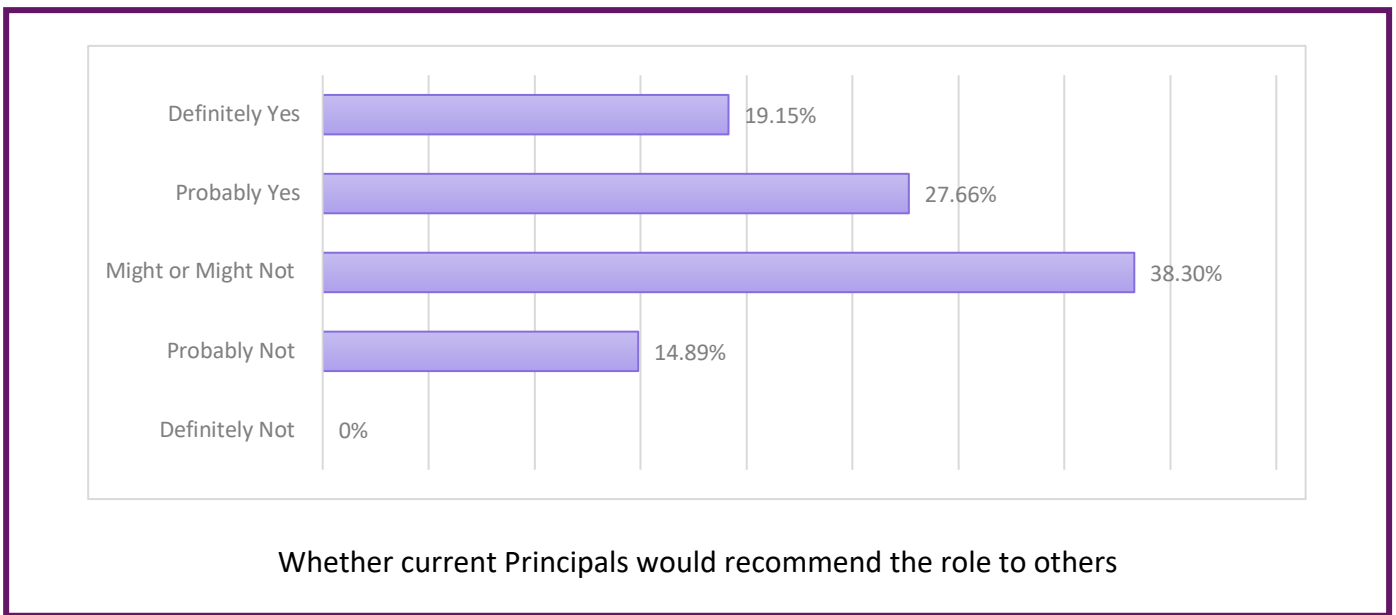


Figure 5: Would you recommend to others?

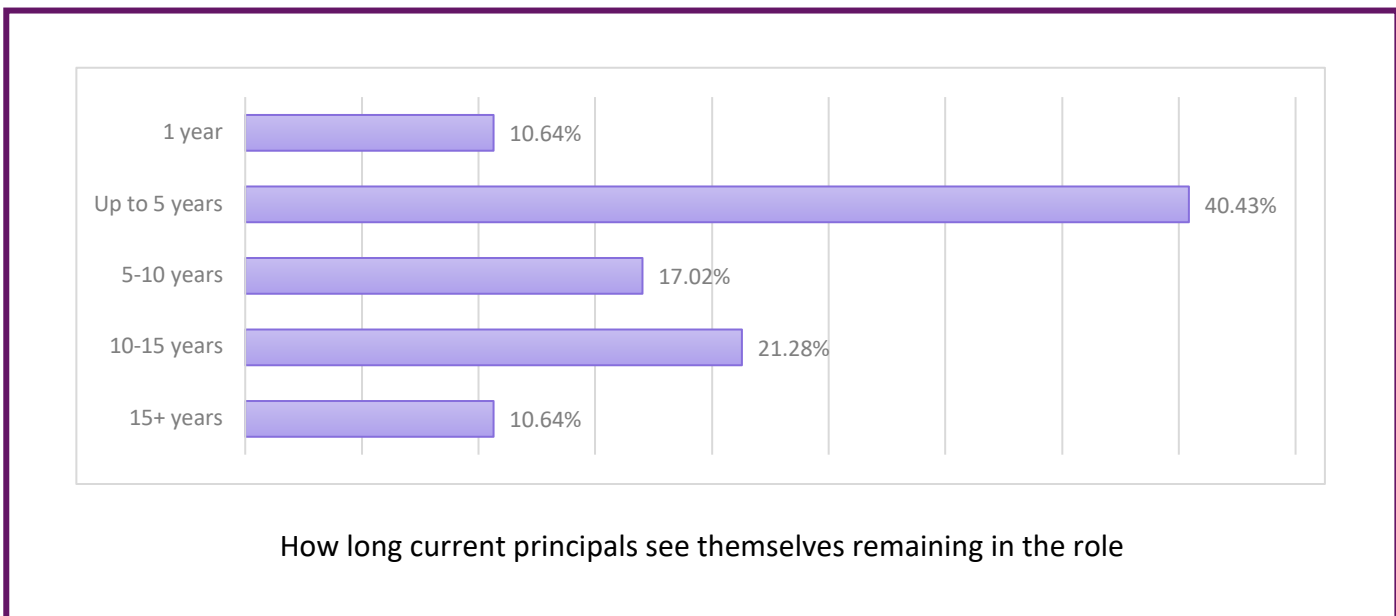


Figure 6: How long will you remain?

Principal Workload

Respondents were asked whether they find their workload manageable. They largely **strongly disagreed** (40.43%) and **somewhat disagreed** (29.79%). That means **70% of respondents currently find their workload to be unmanageable**. No participants felt strongly that their workload is manageable, and only **19% of participants somewhat agreed** that their workload was manageable.

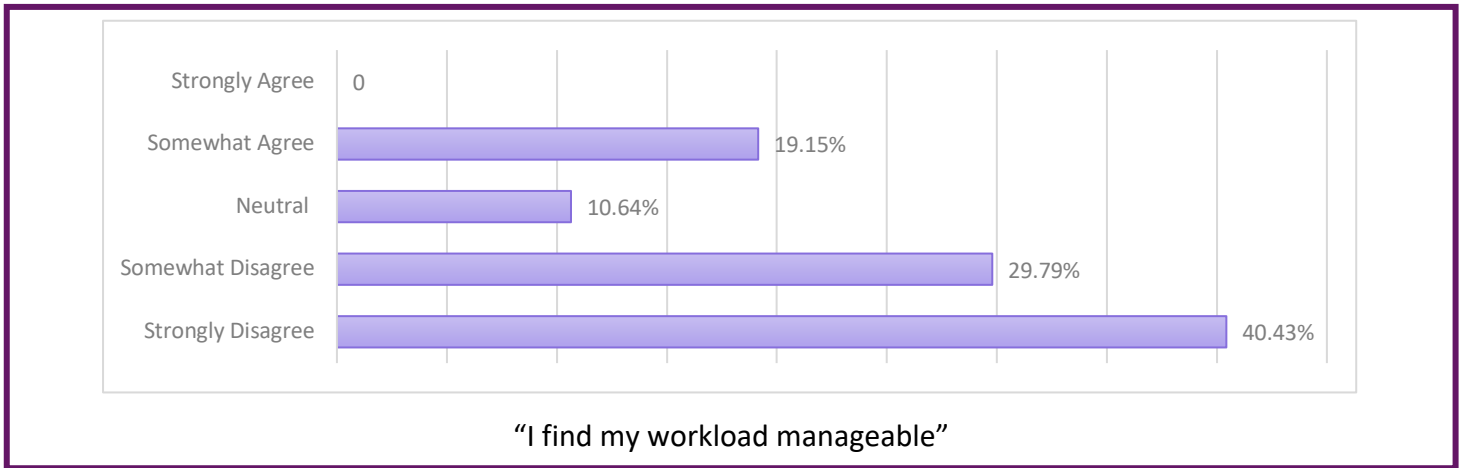


Figure 7: Unmanageable Workloads

We asked respondents to provide further insights into their thoughts on workload.

Their responses included:

- That concerns lie not just in the **volume of workload**, but also the **type of work being undertaken** (descriptions of this included constant crisis management, filling gaps, keeping plates spinning every day)
- Respondents described a significant concern about the lack of opportunity to try to strike a work/life balance, and its consequences for their health and wellbeing in both the short-term and long-term
- Respondents reflected that the majority of what they encounter in their role has a sense of **urgency** attached to it. This includes their school improvement efforts but also request and requirements from systems, which do not recognise that they rarely have time to respond to things quickly in a busy school day
- Respondents described system requirements and requests as distracting from their work, with one respondent referring to systemic requirements as **'stifling bureaucracy'**. They described being frequently pulled into managerialism, and unable to focus on strategic leadership except in their own (ostensible) private time (evenings, weekends, and holidays)
- A related issue was the sense of constant change felt by respondents. This is not new, and previous research has described the negative effects of constant reform and ongoing reform¹⁶
- Two respondents described the workload of a principal as **'death by a thousand cuts'**, saying it is not just one element of their work that causes issues
- Respondents described the emotional toll of leading a school, including the **'burden of worry'** held by principals today.

A consistent theme in this research was principals revealing that they must regularly choose between the responsibilities of the job and their own families.

This impact on principals' lives, with consequences for their health and wellbeing and long-term quality of life, should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

¹⁶ Research has long explored the phenomenon of 'reform fatigue', e.g., Lingard et al. (2000). Teachers, school reform, and social justice: Challenging research and practice. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 27(3), 99-115. In the 20 years since those reports of reform fatigue in Australian schools, school improvement policy reform has explicitly required a 'relentless' focus on continuous improvement.

Possible Retention Factors (“I would have stayed in the principalship longer if...”)

We asked **former principals** what would have made them remain in the role. When considering that only 23% of those respondents left due to retirement, their responses provide important insights into possible retention factors. Their responses included:

- A consistent theme of a need for more support / better support / more effective support. This includes having proactive rather than reactive support for principals, and is tied with previous findings in this report about the importance of **trusting principals** and schools, and supporting them in their work rather than a focus on monitoring them and over-burdening them with compliance-related workload
- Respondents noted that they would have remained in the position for longer had they experienced less stress and emotional toll as part of their work. A number of former principals said they would have stayed in the role if their health had not been impacted by the job
- Respondents suggested that if their work had been able to focus more on supporting young people and teaching and learning, and less on administrative work, they would have remained in the role for longer. This leads us to the next section of the findings – identifying ways of supporting principals to focus on their motivations for entering the role in the first place.

Rewards, Motivation, and Retention Factors

60% of respondents strongly agreed that their work is rewarding, with a further 36% somewhat agreeing. Very few respondents did not find their work rewarding. This reflects what we already know about principals’ work: the rewards are high, satisfaction in their work is high, and we believe this is what keeps principals working through the challenges of their roles.

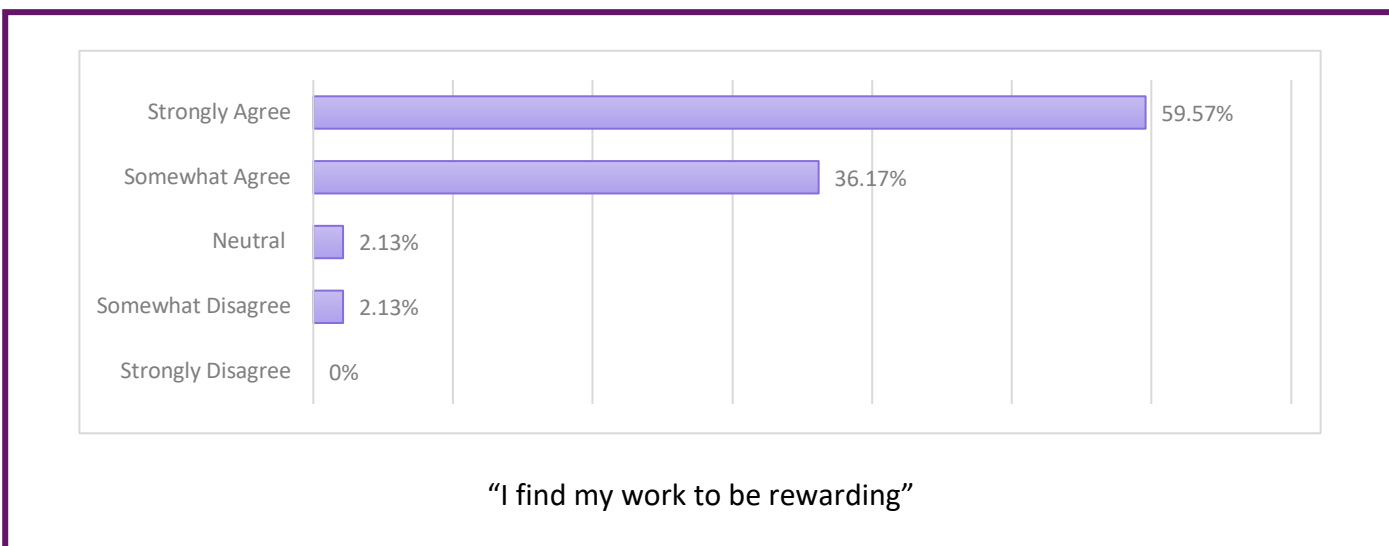


Figure 8: Principals’ work as rewarding

Principals described their **motivations for taking on the role** as including:

- Being able to make a difference and have a positive impact on school culture
- Being able to positively influence teaching and learning
- Taking on the role after having a poor experience with a school or leader – wanting to do something differently than they had experienced (this reflects previous research about principals' motivations)¹⁷
- Being able to work with, support, and influence young people. This included opportunities to be a role model for young people, and to help young people realise and achieve their potential
- A small number of respondents described the role as a 'natural progression' in their career
- A number of respondents entered the role after being identified, mentored, and encouraged to take on the principalship by someone else
- Respondents described the rewards of mentoring, supporting, and developing teachers and future leaders, and then supporting those leaders as they progressed through their own careers
- The overarching response from respondents was the reward of feeling like they were able to make a real difference through their work.



Image from UnSplash

¹⁷ Thomson, P. (2009). *School Leadership: Heads on the Block?* Routledge.

What Principals want Systems and Policymakers to Know

Our final question for current and former principals was to ask them what they would want systems, system leaders, and policymakers to know about their work. **Their responses are powerful and poignant at times, and they reflect the urgency with which these issues need to be addressed.**

Their responses included:

- The critical need for **effective, meaningful, targeted, and proactive support for principals**
- [Senior leaders and policymakers] “need to walk in our shoes for an extended period of time” to really understand their work
- Compliance-related work is perceived as being more important than teaching and learning-focused work
- There are significant amounts of time, money, and hours spent on **compliance** to manage a small few, but they are felt and experienced by all
- Respondents described a mix of regrets to no longer be working, alongside others who described being relieved to have left the role
- The principal role is now **all-encompassing**.
- Community expectations are growing unmanageable for many principals
- A need to spend time cementing good practice, and **stop introducing new policies**
- “We are **hamstrung by data**, systems, and difficult people”
- A need for **ongoing targeted professional learning** for principals at different stages of their careers
- **“This role is unsustainable”** (the unsustainable nature of the principalship was noted in different forms by a number of respondents)
- Respondents questioned the reliance on sometimes-questionable data to measure school performance. This reflects research about the deprofessionalisation of teachers and leaders through a reliance on data and numbers which does not tell the full story of a school
- A final frequent theme was the need to **raise the status and trust** of the profession.

“Why don’t you trust us? Do you know what trust looks like? Why don’t you back us?”

“We need real help”

“Listen to us”

Appendix A: Research Design and Methods

Surveys

An anonymous online survey was open in Qualtrics from May 5, 2021, to May 13, 2022.

This report draws upon 149 complete survey responses. Respondent demographics are as follows:

Current principals - 49

Aspiring principals - 42

Former principals - 58

Appendix B lists the questions each group was asked to respond to.

Demographic information is provided in Appendix C.

Interviews

Interviews were undertaken between November 2021 and March 2022. In the research design phase, it was hoped that the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated pressures would be reduced. However, the reality of principals' work today is highly pressurised with multiple significant competing time commitments.

It was decided early in the fieldwork for the project, therefore, to leave interview participation open to principals, aspirants, and former principals who expressed an interest. The research team decided to focus our attention on data generation methods that had less of a burden on participants' time, and as such we focused on survey recruitment instead.

The eight interviews were undertaken with aspiring, current, and former principals. They provided an opportunity to receive feedback on initial survey data analysis, and to gather illustrative quotes and in-depth stories from participants. Their stories closely aligned with the themes generated through the survey.

Focus Groups

Focus Groups were undertaken between March – May 2022, with Executive members of three Principals' Associations. The focus groups lasted between 35-60 minutes each. They provided an opportunity for Executive members to share insights from their work spanning different contexts and combining their breadth of experience and expertise. Focus Groups also provided an opportunity to receive feedback on the survey analysis. There were approximately 30 focus group participants in total.

Appendix B: Survey Questions

The survey branched out depending on responses to demographic information. Aspiring, current, and former principals all had different questions to answer. The table below shows what each group responded to:

Aspiring Principals	Current Principals	Former Principals
<p>Why do you want to be a principal?</p> <p>Do you have any hesitations about taking on the principal role? If so, what are the causes for your concern?</p> <p>Is there anything that draws you to want to work in specific school settings? (e.g., why might you want to be a principal in a rural school, what would draw you to working in schools in marginalised communities, etc)</p> <p>Do you have a mentor or support network that influences your decisions about applying for a principal role in the future?</p> <p>When do you think you will apply for a principal position?</p> <p>Do you have any other thoughts you'd like to share about your aspirations to the principalship?</p>	<p>Why did you decide to become a principal?</p> <p>Does anything draw you towards working in specific contexts? (e.g., why are you working in a rural school, why are you working in a school in a marginalised or low-SES community, or similar?)</p> <p>What particular challenges do you face in your work as a principal?</p> <p>Please indicate your agreement with the following question: I find my work as a principal to be rewarding.</p> <p>Please indicate your agreement with the following question: I find my work as a principal to be challenging.</p> <p>Please indicate your agreement with the following question: I am supported in my work as a principal.</p> <p>What are the sources of support you have as a principal?</p> <p>Please indicate your agreement with the following question: My workload as a principal is manageable. (Please elaborate with any thoughts about your workload if you would like to)</p> <p>How long do you see yourself remaining within the principalship?</p> <p>Would you recommend to others that they should become principals? (Please elaborate)</p> <p>What advice would you have for an aspiring principal?</p> <p>What do you want your education system and policymakers to know about principals' work today?</p> <p>How do you identify and support / develop future leaders on your staff? Are there formal or informal processes in place for this in your context or your networks?</p> <p>Is there anything else you would like to share about principal work, attraction, retention, or support that we haven't asked?</p>	<p>Why did you decide to become a principal?</p> <p>Why did you leave the principalship?</p> <p>What could have made you stay in the principalship for longer?</p> <p>What were the most challenging aspects of your work as a principal?</p> <p>What were the most rewarding aspects of your work as a principal?</p> <p>Please indicate your agreement with the following question: My workload as a principal was manageable. (Please elaborate)</p> <p>Would you recommend to others that they should become principals?</p> <p>Why would you recommend or not recommend people join the principalship?</p> <p>What advice would you have for an aspiring principal?</p> <p>What do you want your education system and policymakers to know about principals' work today?</p> <p>Is there anything else you would like to share about principal work, attraction, retention, or support that we haven't asked?</p>

Appendix C: Respondent Demographics [Survey Only]

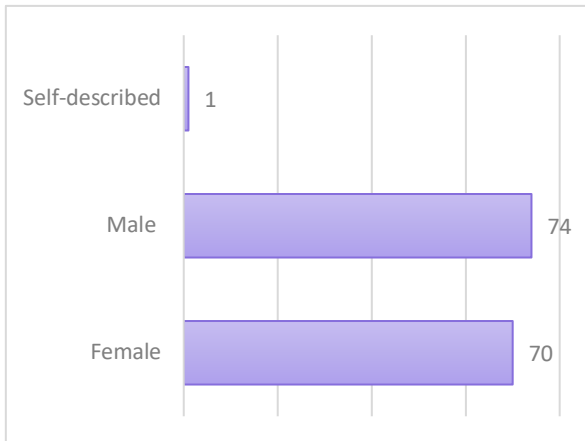


Figure 9: Respondents' Gender¹⁸

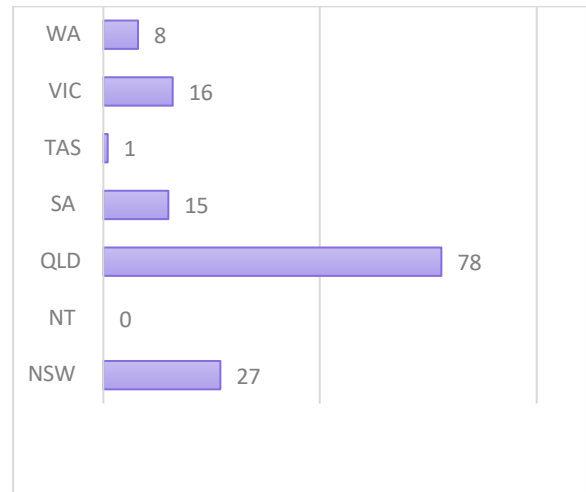


Figure 10: Respondents' Location

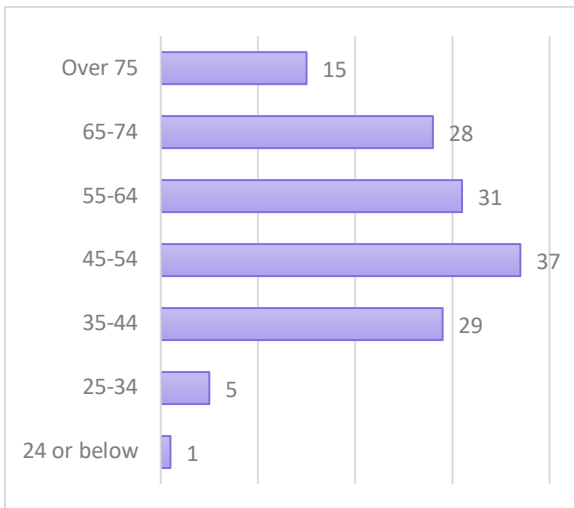


Figure 11: Respondents' Age

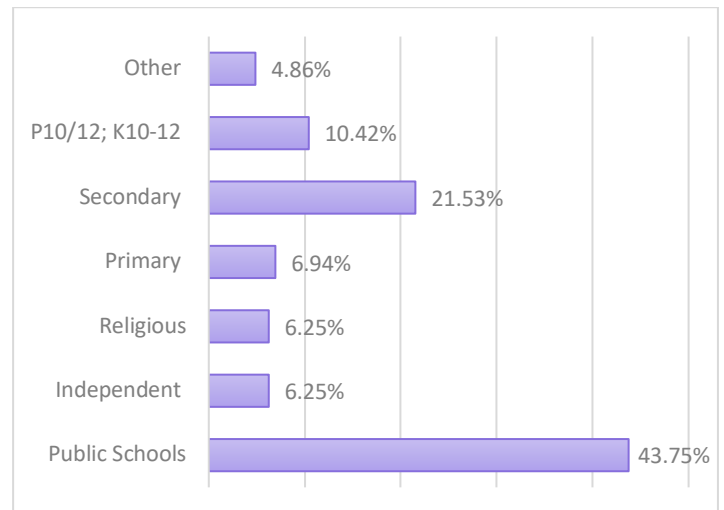


Figure 12: Respondents' Sector¹⁹

¹⁸ One respondent self-described as "human".

¹⁹ Respondents were able to select more than one type of school to provide more nuanced descriptions, e.g. public special school,

Independent P-10 school. Note: 'Other' included Special Schools, Distance Education, Alternative Schools.