

## D. The stress and burnout issues

Since 2011, the ACU annual survey of principals headlines the stress and coping of principals. This year the headline was that “a national crisis is looming as 70% of principals plan to retire soon, and fewer people are willing to step into the role.” This report is picked up by the press and various education bloggers and commentators with even greater dire reactions. Who would want to become a principal, given these headlines? Particularly as the headlines were endorsed and elaborated by principal associations.

The trend lines provided in the survey Report are fascinating. The stressors that were lowest in 2020-21 during COVID but have now returned to pre-COVID levels include the quantity of work, lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, the mental health of students, expectations of employers, parent issues, government initiatives, and critical incident. Yes, these were lower during COVID years. The stressors that have increased since COVID are mostly staff issues: teacher shortages, mental well-being of staff, complaints management, lack of autonomy/ authority, and interpersonal conflicts. Over the past ten years, the stressors that are lower than usual include poorly performing staff, financial management issues, and declining enrolments. It is a mixed picture, and the additional burdens relating to staffing employers and parents seem to be the new emphasis.

Contrast this dismal picture with the results from the TALIS international survey of teachers and school leaders. TALIS (2018) shows Australian teachers' top stressors related to administrative work, marking, being responsible for student achievement, lesson preparing, and maintaining classroom discipline. These latter are core to a teacher's work, and it seems reasonable that they should be stressors: We should want teachers to worry about these matters. Also, note the very high satisfaction with their job reported by Australian principals. Principals' reported job satisfaction is high in Australia, with over 90% of Australian principals agreeing or strongly agreeing with: “I enjoy working at this school” (96%); “All in all, I am satisfied with my job” (98%); “If I could decide again, I would still choose this job/position” (94%); and “I regret that I decided to become a principal” (Australia 3%).

So why the seeming contrast – the screams of stress and workload contrasted with the high satisfaction levels? In the 1980-90s, the research relating to stress moved from focusing on the stressors to the coping strategies to deal with the stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This acknowledges that there are stressors but that we can each have different strategies to cope with the same stressor. These can include problem-solving coping (making plans, setting goals, seeking solutions), emotion-solving (venting, denial, meditation), reframing (challenging negative thoughts, seeing the situation differently), physical self-care (engaging in regular exercise, sleep, relaxation techniques), time management (reprioritising, avoiding procrastination), and social support (support from others, sharing concerns). Educators have incredibly high skill levels at coping with stressors – this is their day job. The message is that we need to be more aware of the coping strategies of educators well before they manifest in enhanced stress and burnout. So many educators have coping strategies that should be recognised and esteemed rather than just noting the number and extent of stressors in our lives.