



The  
MacKillop  
Institute

# Taking care of our school leaders:

The importance of  
understanding adversity  
and self-care



## Executive summary

Leading in complex and somewhat uncertain times can have a detrimental impact to school principals' health and wellbeing. Taking care of our school leaders should be an imperative for all of us. The importance of understanding adversity and self care can make all the difference.

What we know of recent times is that during the global health pandemic we have seen impaired learning, increased child stress, decreased connection, increased loneliness and declining mental health, including anxiety and depression. According to recent reports (Prytz & Carey), there has been a 28% increase in calls to the phone counselling service Kids Helpline between March and July 2020 compared with the same period the year before. In addition to the pressures experienced by our school leaders, during a global pandemic, the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey (2020), confirmed:

An alarming percentage of school leaders (83%) continue to be subjected to at least one form of offensive behaviour in the last 12 months with approximately 43% subjected to threats of violence (5.5x more than the general population); 37% subjected to physical violence (9.4x more than the general population); and 33% subjected to bullying (4.0x more than the general population).

Adaptation in the face of physiological or psychological adversity is required for the survival, health, and well-being of all organisms and school leaders are no different.

There needs to be careful consideration given as to how we manage the demands placed on our school leaders. Fullan cites Evans' (1996) finding that the explosion of demands decreases school leaders' sense of efficiency and heightens their feelings of isolation, insecurity and inadequacy. Changes in social values have been accompanied by growth in expectations that education will contribute to solving social problems (Darling-Hammond et al., 2013)

Principals have a particular responsibility for creating and maintaining their school culture and 'creating the right environment for the right behaviours to occur', as stated by Kerr (2013),

in his book, *Legacy*. This requires an in-depth understanding of their local communities and the diverse student population in their settings. Leaders need to be able to interpret policy and curriculum initiatives and support their staff through the enactment of these. Leading through complex times requires leaders to have a growth mindset and willingness to deepen their knowledge and acquire new information in terms of adverse experiences, especially regarding the impacts of stress and trauma on engagement and learning. They need the flexibility and empathy to respond in evidence informed ways to staff, students and the wider school community who they may find push their boundaries. Leaders need to be able to juggle competing demands but also encourage reflection and self-care and they need to be able to do so with support and resources.

Research has long shown the negative impact of workplace stress in our lives. Today's workplaces are stressing us out, and adversely impacting our health and wellbeing, according to research by Harvard Business School (LeBlanc & Maeques, 2019). We are working too many hours, and too many hours of work have been shown to be related to high-blood pressure and a host of other diseases.



Self-care is a high-yield strategy that enables our school leaders to grant themselves permission to create a circuit-breaker from the intensity of the role and focus on their own recovery. If not, then as stated previously, school leaders are more at risk of compassion fatigue and burnout.

*'School leaders are at risk of burnout, working in demanding and stressful environments with multiple stakeholders, who often have conflicting priorities and demands. School leaders are heavily burdened with the management of the education, safety, health, and wellbeing of their pupils, staff, and school community. The position requires them to always be alert and aware of all matters that relate to their schools, communities, and the reporting requirements, at times dealing with the most stressful of situations in life. As a group, school leaders are at risk of fatigue, mental health decline, and burnout' (Philip et al., 2020).*

According to Fullan (2016), 'in challenging situations people are motivated primarily by intrinsic factors: having a sense of purpose, solving difficult problems and working with peers on issues that are of critical importance to the group. Five strategies that encourage self-care that can be practiced in a routine way are:

- 1. Connection** (in real-time and in your mind) – if you're waking up at night in a hot sweat or you find yourself drifting during the day into deep thoughts and darkness, firstly acknowledge that it is ok to feel how you are feeling. Validate your feelings, embrace them and try to understand them without fear or shame.
- 2. Be present but future focussed** – give yourself the space to breathe the air around you and be present in the moment you are living in. Release yourself of the burden you place on yourself to be perfect or to just make everything work, creating a positive energy in this state of mind.
- 3. Establish a routine or structure** within your realm of influence – it is so important to create patterned, repetitive, positive routine and structure, creating consistency in your life. We cannot control what is out of our control.
- 4. Pivot** from negative challenge to positive challenge – think about a time in the past when you faced leadership adversity and ask yourself what or who helped you get through that? What insights did you gain about your

ability to handle challenges? What strengths did you draw upon at that time that might help you now as you face new challenges?

- 5. Sync with your values** – having the courage to be vulnerable and showing up is of vital importance. Reconnect with what you value in life and work. Sometimes life's adversity present us with opportunity to gain perspective and reset or reconnect with what we value.

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