Autonomy, Accountability, and Principals' Work: An Australian Study

Final Report

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Foreword

Australian public secondary schools serve an ever-increasing pivotal role in our wide-ranging communities across our nation. They enrich the lives of children and young people by helping them to reach their potential, contribute to the economy through work, and play an active role in contributing as citizens of the future.

Understanding that we are leading our school communities at a time of rapid change, in a world of increasing complexity and increasing community expectations of schools, the Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA) has worked with Monash University's Faculty of Education to address one of the largest contemporary challenges of schools – principal autonomy. Our interest was sparked by additional studies that identified Principal autonomy as a large stressor in the Principal's role. An examination of contemporary policy and practice through Principals' eyes, this report proposes some ways forward and provide a reference point for ASPA's future decision making around autonomy and associated matters.

This report challenges the certainties of current policy and practice by pointing out that Principal autonomy in educational decision making is always context specific. The report proposes a way forward that has high involvement and leadership from the Principal Associations, and links Principal autonomy to attraction and retention of Principals.

Importantly, this paper affirms to the community all those aspects of public education that contribute to enhancing the learning outcomes of our young people, and to building the common good.

The ASPA Board thanks Monash University for the work on this significant document. We believe that it will encourage discussion and debate across the educational landscape as together we grapple with the important question of how to maintain, enhance and promote the quality of our wonderful public education systems.

It is in that spirit that I commend this research to you.

Andrew Pierpoint
President
Australian Secondary Principals' Association

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1. Executive Summary

The work of Australia's public secondary school principals continues to increase in complexity and scope. This report presents findings from a national study into the experiences of principals who are working within policy conditions that feature principal autonomy to make decisions that meet local needs, and an increase in external accountabilities for schools alongside an increase in concerns about principal health and wellbeing due to workload and the complex nature of the role.

The study was designed by Monash University's Dr Amanda Heffernan and the Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA) President Andrew Pierpoint in response to ongoing concerns about the implications of workload and wellbeing for the attraction and retention of principals. Key policy drivers of autonomy and accountability were chosen as lenses into understanding the work of principals in Australia's public secondary schools, and learning more about the everyday work involved in leading a school today.

The study was conducted over a 12-month period, and 235 principals took part in the research. Data were generated through an anonymous online survey and in-depth interviews. Key findings and recommendations are summarised in the table below.

2. Key Findings and Recommendations

Issue	Key Findings	Recommendation
The Role of the Principal	**The role of the principal has continued to expand over time.** • Many participants described the role as being overwhelming and all-encompassing. Recurring issues were revealed of extension of work into private time and intensification of the pace and amount of work involved in leading schools today. **There are issues relating to role clarity and clarity of accountability responsibilities for some autonomous principals.** • Participants described challenges in being able to identify and respond to what was urgent (needing immediate attention) vs what was important (critical tasks that were not as pressing). This has led to rising workloads and impacts on health and wellbeing of participants.	Clarity and definition is needed about the role of the principal in the current climate. The role description of the principal should be refined to reflect current requirements and ensure the role is manageable. Forums should be led by leadership experts (e.g., principals' associations & members, consortium of leadership researchers in each state), system leaders, and policymakers to identify role description and principal responsibilities. Principal voice and input needs to be significant in this process.
The Sustainability of Principals' Work in Australian Public Secondary Schools Today	**Principal workload and wellbeing are at a critical point for many participants.** **There are clear and pressing issues relating to the identification and attraction of future principals.** • Principal participants reported that their staff members (including deputy and assistant principals) did not wish to take on the Principalship after seeing the workload involved **Issues of attraction and retention of leaders are of serious concern to ASPA.** • The wellbeing and support of principals is paramount to a strong and well-functioning public education system.	Strategic policies and programs should be developed that specifically address the attraction and retention of Principals. A comprehensive wellbeing program should be developed for Principals, using expert researchers and experienced providers (e.g., academic research in health and wellbeing; organisations currently working in principal wellbeing such as *headspace*).
Principals' Perceptions of Autonomy	**Participants identified a need for a clear definition and structures around principal autonomy.** • There were significant differences in principals' sense of autonomy depending on their state or territory policies and practices • Principals have defined autonomy as being trusted and supported to set priorities that meet their school community's needs, even when these might diverge from the Department's needs • Participants acknowledged the need for appropriate knowledge, skills, experience, and training, in being able to identify those priorities. **There was a great deal of variance in how much autonomy participants felt they had.** • Principals' career stage, experience, and networks are a significant influence on their perceptions and enactment of autonomy.	Principals should be provided support to participate in structured and ongoing Professional Learning developed by the jurisdiction and Principals' Associations that addresses key issues relating to autonomy including (but not limited to): • definitions, expectations and associated accountabilities • examples of decision-making processes and possibilities • community engagement in autonomous decision-making to meet local needs

	Research and policy focusing on autonomy in Australian principals needs to acknowledge the different career structures and trajectories, and school leadership team and staffing structures, of secondary schools when compared to primary schools.	• risk identification and mitigation. Case studies should be developed that showcase the possibilities for autonomous decision-making and leadership from different school contexts around the country.
Relationships and Autonomy	**The importance of principals' relationships with their supervisors was clear. Principals reflected on their relationships with their supervisors and highlighted the importance of**: • Clear communication • Experience in the same sector (or openness to learning about it) • A supportive inquiry stance (similar to 'professional companioning' where supervisors 'walk with' principals) through their improvement and leadership journeys.[1]	The ratio of supervisors to principals should be reduced so that supervisors can spend more time knowing communities and leaders, and walking beside them. Supervision structures should take on a 'walking with' model, focusing on the development and support of principals with a long career development view.
Policies, Practices, and Structures that Support Principal Autonomy	**A key factor in supporting principals to lead autonomously was clarity of: roles and responsibilities; accountability frameworks; and decision-making processes including for:** • principal role • principals' supervisors' role • education system support officers and roles **Participants discussed alternative ways of structuring school leadership teams to support more autonomous decision-making and leadership.** • Principals in some states had more autonomy over their leadership team structures felt able to meet their local needs more effectively by directing leadership resources and focus towards pressing issues. • Principals who had autonomy over the structure of their leadership team felt more able to successfully undertake their work as well as reporting higher levels of job satisfaction and wellbeing.	Clarify principal role, alongside clarification of decision-making and authority / responsibility for leaders. Provide exemplar case studies / examples of different ways of structuring leadership teams and processes to meet local needs.

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[1] For more, see: Degenhardt, L. (2013). Professional companioning: Support for leaders in managing the increasing complexity of their roles. *Leading and managing*, *19*(2), 15.

3. The Role of the Principal

The role of the principal has continued to expand over time.
- Many participants described the role as being overwhelming and all-encompassing. Recurring issues were revealed of extension of work into private time and intensification of the pace and amount of work involved in leading schools today.

There are issues relating to role clarity and clarity of accountability responsibilities for some autonomous principals.
- Participants described challenges in being able to decide how to respond to what was urgent (needing immediate attention) vs what was important (critical tasks that were not as pressing). This has led to rising workloads and impacts on the health and wellbeing of participants.

Elaboration

Expansion of the Role of the Principal

The role of the principal has increased in scope and complexity over the years. The work involved in the Principalship was described by participants as becoming more complex, and requiring them to be responsible for a wider range of tasks and duties than in the past.

Increased 'complexity' of the role includes requirements for principals and schools to take on responsibility for human services that would previously have been the remit of other departments or government organisations. For example, frequently recurring comments from principals described taking on significant responsibilities for pastoral care of their students and communities with little support and resourcing - particularly those schools in rural and regional locations with multiple associated challenges or a lack of systemic access to support services. Participants spoke about facilitating access to health care, social services, legal support, facilitating employment support for community members, helping community members to receive mental health care and support, and working proactively to support health and wellbeing initiatives within the community. Participants described the importance of these initiatives but also reflected on the time and emotional energy that they took, and the implications for their increased and intensified workloads. Participants frequently reflected on how this impacted on expectations that their focus should be on instructional leadership, and that it was difficult to find the time to address these complex leadership requirements within a reasonable working week.

The complexity of the role was also evident in participants' comments that principals' work has grown to encompass a wider range of operational, managerial, and educational leadership matters than it had in the past.[2] This was described as being due in part to increased school autonomy (and the associated rise in accountabilities), but also due to a reduction in centralised support for schools. Principals described taking on significant duties and responsibilities that were once centralised and a recurring theme was that these duties and responsibilities did not always have a clear link to the educational leadership they are ostensibly required to demonstrate as the major focus of their work.[3]

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[2] For recent discussion of rising workloads for school principals and the subsequent effects on principal stress and burnout, see: Oplatka, I. (2017). Principal workload. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *55*(5), 552-568.

[3] Research has previously suggested that administrative support for government schools is inadequate given the expectations placed on schools, and that it is insufficient in contrast to the support provided for principals in most independent schools. See: Educational Transformations. (2007). *Principal Autonomy Research Project*. Melbourne: Department of Education, Science and Training. Other research has suggested that a

> *"Even things like capital works projects, we manage that now. I'm involved with those, if we've got renovations or we've got work being done to the toilets. A car literally ran into a sign at the front of the school back in January, and I had to work with the [Education Department] and chase them and chase them to get the job fixed. It took us 10 months to get a new sign erected back out the front. That's 10 months of my life I'll never get back, which could have been focused on teaching and learning, rather than once a week having to send an email to [the capital works department] saying, 'Where's the sign?'"* (Interview participant)

The biggest source of additional pressures identified by participants was centralised monitoring and accountability processes that frequently required principals' responses and attention. This included compliance procedures that required principals to seek approvals or permissions from multiple sources, which participants described as a doubling up of responsibilities. They also referred frequently to 'administrivia' and noted that the level of administrative work involved in their roles continued to increase over time.[4]

Principals in all jurisdictions identified a key issue as being a lack of clarity about their role. They described a mismatch between their perceptions, public perceptions, and systemic perceptions of the role of the principal. Previous research has suggested that an 'ideal' principal position would include clearly defined role expectations.[5] Participants in this study identified that clarity in the principal role itself was needed and, as a result, a subsequent redefinition of the structures, authorities, and positions relating to the role (e.g., the varied responsibilities of a principal; a middle leader; and system representatives or principal supervisors).

Recommendation

Clarity and definition is needed about the role of the principal in the current climate.

> We recommend forums to be led by leadership experts comprised of principals' associations & their members, a consortium of leadership researchers in each state or territory, system leaders, and policymakers to identify the principal's role description & responsibilities.[6]

Principal voice and input needs to be significant in this process.

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lack of resourcing in some autonomous systems can hinder principals' opportunities to be innovative. See: Gobby, B. (2013). Enacting the Independent Public Schools program in Western Australia. *Issues in Educational Research, 23*(1), 19-34.

[4] This also reflects recent work from APPA that highlighted increasing 'administrivia' as a major concern for principals: Australian Primary Principals' Association. (2017). *Out of balance: The workload never stops. Preliminary Report for the Adelaide Symposium 2017.* Surrey Hills: Australian Primary Principals Association.

[5] Fraser, J., & Brock, B. L. (2006). Catholic school principal job satisfaction: Keys to retention and recruitment. *Catholic education: A journal of inquiry and practice, 9*(4).

[6] There is a large body of Australian and international leadership research that can further contribute to our understandings of the changing nature of the principal role. We recommend that a consortium of researchers from each state or territory can bring their research expertise and understanding of the local policy conditions to support a nuanced understanding of the role of the principal in that context.

4. The Sustainability of Principals' Work in Australian Schools Today

Principal workload and wellbeing are at a critical point for many participants

Issues of attraction and retention of leaders are of serious concern
- The wellbeing and support of principals is paramount to a strong and well-functioning public education system.

Elaboration

Principal Workload and Wellbeing

The study revealed that principal workload and wellbeing are at a critical point for many participants. Participants identified the **extension** and **intensification** of the role. This means the work required of the principal role *extended* into their personal time, and that the pace and complexity of the work was *intensified*. This aligns with research into current labour practices for educators around the world and has serious ramifications for the attraction and retention of principals, their wellbeing, and the quality of their working lives.[7]

One participant reflected that the scope of the role had extended so far that it could no longer be achieved within a reasonable working day or week:

> *"I think what gets in the way is just principals want to do the best job they can and they know they can't fit the work that's needed for that inside a 7 to 5 day, or a 7 to 6 day, and they know there's going to be work they're going to take home. But in saying that, that's teaching too. I look at my wife [a teacher]. Her and I sit beside each other on the lounge every night, and there's just emails, screens, buckets of work, and that's the case in so many households."*
> *(Interview participant)*

A recurring theme within the findings was that the workload associated with being a principal today was described as having a significant impact on their:
- Personal relationships
- Health and wellbeing, including interruptions to sleep, increased anxiety and stress, subsequent need for medication (and self-medication)
- Self-care. The workload and associated pressures manifested for many participants in a lack of opportunity to undertake acts of self-care including exercise, relaxation and recreation, and to engage in regular activities with family and friends.

> **Q:** *So how do you look after yourself then?*
> **A: Me?**
> **Q:** *Yeah.*
> **A: I don't. No, no, I'm – no, I just… I don't.**
> - *Interview participant*

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[7] Some recent work that has explored the intensification and extension of educators' work includes:
Fitzgerald, S., McGrath-Champ, S., Stacey, M., Wilson, R., & Gavin, M. (2019). Intensification of teachers' work under devolution: A 'tsunami' of paperwork. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, *61*(5), 613-636.
Lawrence, D. F., Loi, N. M., & Gudex, B. W. (2019). Understanding the relationship between work intensification and burnout in secondary teachers, *Teachers and Teaching, 25*(2), 189-199.
McGrath-Champ, S., Wilson, R., & Stacey, M. (2017). *Teaching & Learning: Review of Workload*. The University of Sydney.

Research continues to suggest that there are personal and family impacts as a result of the long hours required of the job.[8] The impact of **extension** of the Principalship and its subsequent impact on family and personal time has potentially negative effects for recruitment of women leaders in particular, due to the perceptions of the time commitment required to undertake the role.[9] Moreover, the issue of a lack of people interested in taking up the Principalship is cause for concern and is evident in participants' comments that members of their middle leadership teams, regardless of gender and family or personal commitments, have seen the work involved in the role and elect instead to remain in their current positions rather than seek promotion to the Principalship.

The emotional and physical toll that the Principalship is taking on leaders was particularly evident and is highlighted in some of the quotes below. Of significant concern in this study is a recurring theme that showed the burden of the work of leading a school today, and that participants often felt there was little support available to them:

> *So, for me, that is the tremendous burden that we as a school are expected to take, and the support around us is minimal, and that's - I'll be honest, it's gutting. I go home and I struggle carrying this burden, but you have a chat with people and they say, "here's the number for employee assistance" and you go "yeah, f'ing great". (Interview participant)*

Principals also spoke about the physical effects of the job and related stories of health concerns:

> *We're under incredible pressure, we really are, people don't get it. My health is impacted, right, I have back spasms because of the tension that I'm under. But […] I'm trying to be a better example to my younger Assistant Principals, and try and manage my time, but we're under incredible relentless pressure. (Interview participant)*

One participant commented on a growing sense among colleagues that ill-health was rising among school leaders in part as a result of their work:

> *[In 14 months] I went to four funerals of current or recently retired principals. Now I'm not saying the job killed them, but I absolutely know that the impact of the job impacted their health. (Interview participant)*

Initial findings of this study suggest that this issue is potentially exacerbated by career stage. We suggest there are number of possible factors influencing this. More experienced principals are often in larger schools with experienced leadership teams to support them, and leadership teams are described as being a key factor in participants' support networks, and an enabling factor in their ability to carry out their work (e.g., Deputy Principals, Assistant Principals, or Curriculum Coordinators).

> *This is the first time I've been a principal and I'm seven terms in, so not quite two years, and I'm not sure how much I can [choose not to follow some directives*

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[8] Riley, P. (2019). *The Australian principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing survey 2018 Data.* Australian Catholic University

Thomson, P., & Blackmore, J. (2006). Beyond the power of one: redesigning the work of school principals. *Journal of Educational Change, 7*(3), 161-177.

[9] Cannon, H. (2004). *Redesigning the Principalship in Catholic schools.* (Unpublished Thesis). Australian Catholic University.

relating to externally-mandated school improvement targets]. I'm not brave enough to do that yet, but it's just so meaningless. (Interview participant)

We also found that location had an impact on principals' experiences of intensification and extension of their work. Beginning principals are often appointed to lead increasingly challenging or complex schools, adding to their workload pressures, whereas principals tend to move to more 'desirable' locations as their careers progress.[10] Beginning principals are also more likely to be found in rural or remote schools which are characterised by smaller leadership teams and smaller staff numbers (subsequently providing the principal with fewer formal or informal support structures at the school), as well as being geographically distant from neighbouring principal colleagues, who could be sources of support and mentoring.[11] This has flow-on effects for principals' development, support, networking, and wellbeing. In addition, rural principals take on additional complex duties unique to rural and remote leadership – for example, the oversight of teacher housing.

Autonomy and Workload Pressures
Autonomy was seen as both adding to, and ameliorating, workload pressures for participants. The responses from participants reflected a split between the two perspectives, with the majority of workload pressures being identified as being from increased accountabilities and compliance processes that rose alongside ostensible increases in autonomy for principals. The most commonly recurring theme was that workloads have been significantly increased due to a sharp rise in compliance-based accountability measures that accompany autonomy. **At the same time, however, principals were clear that they would not want to give up their autonomy, even with the increased workload in mind**. This reflects previous research which has found similar tensions, and noted that principals with higher autonomy felt empowered to lead school improvement and to meet local needs.[12]

The additional workload created by having more autonomy meant participants described the wider variety of tasks that they were responsible for (procurement, contracts, and services that were once the remit of the system e.g., having complete oversight of school buses from the tender to the daily running process). A recurring comment was about cleaning and maintenance contracts and staff being an example of an area of responsibility that was part of an autonomous principal's work, which took a significant amount of time and energy. The additional work was described by many participants as being related to accountability and compliance measures that arose alongside increases in autonomy. Illustrative comments from the survey included:

- *Workload issues are largely associated with compliance to rules and regulations not autonomy*
- *Most of my workload comes from compliance pressures, things I have to do for others in a specific time frame.*
- *Yes. Being tied down by so much systemic red tape, along with being directed by the system about what's important, both of which detract from any perceived autonomy and are contributors to workload pressure.*

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[10] Béteille, T., Kalogrides, D., & Loeb, S. (2012). Stepping stones: Principal career paths and school outcomes. *Social Science Research*, *41*(4), 904-919.

[11] Previous research found that principals in smaller schools had less opportunity to delegate tasks, contributing to role overload and increased time spent on compliance and administration. For more, see: Lock, G., & Lummis, G. (2014). Complying with school accountability requirements and the impact on school leaders. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education (Online), 39*(2), 58. doi:10.14221/ajte.2014v39n2.7

[12] Hamilton Associates. (2015). *School Autonomy: Building the conditions for student success. Final Report*. Perth: Department of Education.

- *Yes - where 'red tape' involves systematic steps and stages at a singular level and is not reflective of the various needs across the state, this is directly associated with extra workload. Greater flexibility to address the changing dynamics experienced in different geographical locations across the state would reduce workload, stress and reduce the corresponding management within those locations.*

> *"Yeah without a doubt, the greater the autonomy, the greater the workload. There is no doubt that that's the case. I quite often reflect on, because I've been in this for a long time, I reflect on the principal role when I first went to my previous school and what his role was. And I just wondered what he did with his time during the day, because his staffing was determined for him, that was done centrally, so had no say in that. The curriculum was defined, there were actually books with the curriculum defined, so there was no curriculum development. Student behaviour management was not regulated, there were no records, it was whatever he decided to do on a given day. So, it really is quite interesting to see that shift." (Interview participant)*

One concern raised by participants was in relation to the time and energy given over to managerial tasks, compliance, and reporting or responding to accountability measures, which was seen as being at odds with participants' focus of leading learning in their schools. One interview participant commented:

> *"There's little things […] that just eat away at your time, and it's drawing us away from being instructional leaders, to really focusing on the operation of a school. I think if you talk to anyone who signed up to work in education, to work in a classroom, or even a school leader, they really signed up to be that instructional leader, and to work on that part of school life. The end game is improving student learning outcomes, but we're really taken away almost 50% of our time on operational matters that probably could be given to someone else." (Interview participant)*

The notion of the operational and managerial being seen as a distraction from principals' core business is not a new one, and has previously been evidenced in the Australian context under the current policy conditions.[13]

Of particular concern arising from this study, though, is the level to which principals identified feeling that their role focus had shifted away from their core business, and the amount of pressure identified by participants regardless of their context or career stage. Very few participants described their workload as being manageable. This sense of pressure and role overload, and its subsequent implications for principal wellbeing, attraction, and retention are key findings of this study.

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[13] See recent discussions of principals trying to balance their focus on instructional leadership with managerial and operational matters in the following:

McGrath-Champ, S., Stacey, M., Wilson, R., & Fitzgerald, S. (2018). *Understanding work in schools: The foundation for teaching and learning*. Sydney: NSW Teachers Federation.

NSW Department of Education. (2017). *Principal workload and time use study.* Sydney: NSW Department of Education.

Strategic policies and programs should be developed to address issues of attraction and retention of Principals in a targeted way.

Issues of wellbeing and workload, and subsequent intent to remain in the profession (retention of leaders) are being compounded by issues of identification of future leaders, and the unattractive nature of the Principalship in its current form. Attention needs to be paid to the *identification*, *recruitment,* and *retention* of Australia's school leaders.

A comprehensive wellbeing program for Principals should be developed, using expert researchers and experienced providers (e.g., academic research in health and wellbeing alongside current organisations working in principal wellbeing such as headspace).

This program needs to be freely available to principals regardless of their location, and needs to be built with principal input so that the support is seen as being relevant and meeting the needs of today's school leaders.[14]

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[14] Some participants referred to the costs of engaging external organisations and companies to focus on wellbeing as 'too great' and noted that this created a barrier for access to health and wellbeing support for leaders, staff, and students.

5. Principals' Perceptions of Autonomy

Participants identified a need for a clear definition and structures around principal autonomy.
- There were significant differences in principals' sense of autonomy depending on their state or territory policies and practices.
- Principals have defined autonomy as being trusted and supported to set priorities that meet their school community's needs, even when these might diverge from the Department's needs.
- Participants acknowledged the need for appropriate knowledge, skills, experience, and training, in being able to identify those priorities.

There was a great deal of variance in how much autonomy participants felt they had.
- Principals' career stage, experience, and networks are a significant influence on their perceptions and enactment of autonomy.

Elaboration

Principals' Definitions of Autonomy
Interview and survey participants were asked to define autonomy, with some illustrative responses quoted below:
- *Being able to make the best decisions for my school*
- *Being given a goal or a target, given supporting resources to achieve that target, and being left alone to get on with it*
- *Being able to make decisions without permission*
- *Being able to make decisions independently*
- *Being able to take action within set parameters*
- *I don't ask permission, I make decisions within the policy boundaries. I understand policy.*

Participants referred to a number of concepts of autonomy in their responses, including the notion of 'connected autonomy' (making local decisions as part of a wider system, and the importance of remaining part of a strong public education system) and 'earned autonomy' (greater levels of autonomy based on track records, trust, and relationships).

Variance in Principals' Perceptions of Autonomy
There was a clear theme within participant responses that there was a lack of clarity or consistency regarding the definition and the enactment of autonomy. One principal commented: *My work role is not clearly defined; my authorities are not clear so subsequently there are muddles with regard to my autonomy.*

The level of autonomy varied between each state and territory, as can be expected by the differing policy contexts which characterises each jurisdiction. Some states, including Western Australia, Victoria, and Queensland, had strong policies of principal autonomy with varying histories and traditions in each of those states. Participants described shifting expectations and practices associated with those policies, some of which were under formal and informal reviews at the time of interviews. It is important to note here that some principals in all jurisdictions commented on a sense that their autonomy was being reduced over time. This was not common across all participants, but was evident from principals in each of the states and territories.

The varying degrees of principal autonomy resulted in different definitions of autonomy as well as varying levels among principals' perceptions of their own autonomy. Survey participants were asked if they felt they truly had autonomy in their work and Figure 1 below reflects that the majority of participants felt they had a lot (26%), or a moderate amount (36%) of autonomy in their roles.

27% A lot	36% A moderate amount	21% A little

■ A great deal ■ A lot ■ A moderate amount ■ A little ■ None at all
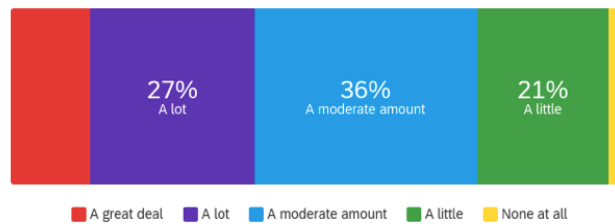
Figure 1 – How much autonomy survey participants felt they held

Another key factor in the difference of perceptions and experiences of autonomy among participants was their career stage (relating to the notion of 'earned autonomy' described above). Participants who were earlier in their careers identified that they felt more constrained by departmental requirements and targets, whereas those same targets and requirements were perceived very differently by principals who had been in the role for some time and had more experience in knowing the 'rules of the game' so to speak.[15] The comment by one participant below is illustrative of this tension. Their school system had mandated three areas of school improvement and set associated targets with those areas:

> *"I won't say I'm at the latter part of my career, but I'm at a point where I have a very broad experience of having gone through a lot of improvement processes and cycles. And so, you learn very quickly how to apportion balance to that. I think for some of the earlier career principals, it is a major struggle because there's an unhealthy focus on those three aspects at the expense of the broad spectrum of improvement across the whole school." (Interview participant)*

The notion that principals who had built a positive track record with their supervisors and communities were more confident in their autonomy is evident in the following quote from an experienced principal in a state with formalised autonomy policies:

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[15] Policy and research focusing on autonomy in Australian principals needs to acknowledge the different career structures and trajectories, and school leadership team and staffing structures, of secondary schools when compared to primary schools.

"Now what I do like about the current autonomy is that there is, for me, there is enough freedom in the system for us to be able to do that in whatever we feel is the best way. Yes, we have to deal with some core curriculum, and I'm okay with that. There's some curriculum I disagree with, some I agree with, but that's okay, I'm quite happy for other people to make those decisions. NAPLAN is a good debate, whether we agree with NAPLAN or not. Actually, I don't mind other way. If the Department say do that, do that, then we'll do that, but we don't lose sight of the end game. The end game is to get kids across the line and I believe – I do believe - that if you're a successful school then the Department is also willing to give you a little more leeway in being able to achieve that sort of stuff because you're successful, you're not necessarily breaking any rules. You might be bending them, you might be pushing them, but actually you're achieving some success. And it's funny isn't it, because when you achieve success it's called innovation. When you fail it's called breaking the rules." (Interview participant)

Areas Where Principals Felt They Had Autonomy

Survey participants were asked to reflect on the areas where they felt they had the most autonomy as principals. The following broad themes were generated from recurring patterns in their responses. It is important to note that the responses were nuanced and that there are tensions within these responses for principals in different jurisdictions and at different career stages or contexts. For example, principals in some jurisdictions referred to strong teacher transfer systems having a negative impact on their sense of autonomy, especially those principals who were experienced and perceived as effective in developing and supporting teachers. This reflects findings from previous research where principals expressed concern about being held accountable for student outcomes without being able to influence the staffing in their schools.[16]

- Community partnerships & engagement
- Local curriculum enactment
- Developing school vision
- Finance
- Staffing (though not in all jurisdictions. Staffing and finance were both representative of areas of tensions where some principals felt significant autonomy and others felt they lacked autonomy)
- Ways of meeting school improvement targets (though the targets themselves were often externally mandated or negotiated with supervisors & school improvement officers)[17]
- Student support and pastoral care
- Daily operations and structures – timetabling, behaviour management and support, staff development

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[16] Previous research in the Australian context has explored the tensions principals feel about working within a school improvement policy agenda where they felt rhetoric about autonomy did not match their experiences of autonomy over staffing matters. For more detail, see: Heffernan, A. (2018). Power and the 'autonomous' principal: autonomy, teacher development, and school leaders' work. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, *50*(4), 379-396.

[17] Eacott (2019) provides a framework for considering how successful leaders might balance externally-mandated targets with local needs. See: Eacott, S. (2019). High-Impact School Leadership in Context. *Leading & Managing, 25*(2).

Limits to Autonomy as Part of a School System

The parameters and expectations from schooling systems featured prominently in interviews and in the survey findings. A number of participants referred to the importance of the public schooling system of their state or territory as being a moderator of how much autonomy they felt they held. There was a sense that a principal could only be so autonomous within a wider education system, which reflects previous findings that public primary school principals felt they held less autonomy than principals in other sectors.[18]

Two principals commented:
- *True autonomy and state-run education are not compatible. Being part of a system means you are often required to do things for the greater good.*
- *True autonomy is an illusion as there are guidelines and policies that determine what and to what extent principals are able to make independent decisions in all aspects of our work.*

Participants described frustration at being judged on measures over which they felt they had little autonomy. The comment below is illustrative of this theme: *There are many critical decisions that I am not able to enact with autonomy due to policy settings, government of the day priorities and restrictive HR processes.*

Other participants felt that autonomy was more rhetoric than reality:
- *I have no autonomy. The [state] Education Department is very intrusive.*
- *There are a multitude of competing agendas with an even larger layer of 'non-negotiables' that sit beneath that.*
- *Work is highly prescribed by Department.*
- *Systemic considerations continue to determine actions and responses. Whilst I understand the need for some corporate compliance - the need to meet context is greater.*
- *There are many critical decisions that I am not able to enact with autonomy due to policy settings, government of the day priorities and restrictive HR processes.*

It was evident that principals felt greater autonomy in:
- schools with data that met departmental goals
- schools described as 'leafy green' advantaged schools *but also* schools described by participants as 'too hard' or complex (principals in both of these categories described being 'left alone' by their supervisors)
- later stages of their careers (when they had built up track records of trust, when they had detailed knowledge of policies and procedures, and when they were able to proactively manage issues before they needed support from a supervisor).[19]

Some participants indicated that this was due, in part, to the large ratio of principals to supervisors, suggesting that supervisors with higher numbers of principals under their care were unable to spend time proactively working with school leaders and instead had to be responsive to urgent issues as they arose.

Key issues raised as indicative of an absence of 'true' autonomy for principals were:

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[18] Australian Primary Principals' Association (APPA). (2014). *School Autonomy in Primary Education.* Canberra.
[19] This can also be seen in recent research from South Australia, where principals discussed the tensions inherent in their experiences of autonomy, with some noting that their autonomy was contingent on 'not causing any grief'. For more, see Dolan, C. (2020). *Paradox in the Lives and Work of School Principals*. South Australian Primary Principals' Association and South Australian Secondary Principals' Association. https://www.saspa.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Dolan_Report.pdf

- Staffing and HR processes that hindered principals' perceptions of being able to recruit the best staff member for roles (though other principals in the same jurisdictions felt confident in their autonomy in this area, which indicates some discrepancies in principals' sense and enactment of autonomy)
- A lack of discretion over budgeting and financial resourcing
- Externally-mandated targets and areas of focus for school improvement

Principals' 'Utopian' Visions of Autonomy

Participants were asked to describe what principal autonomy would look like in an ideal world. We felt this was important to ask so that we could provide some opportunities for reimagining current practices, drawn from the expertise and experience of current school leaders working under contemporary policy conditions.

Principals responded that there would be:
- Alignment between all levels of systems leadership in relation to expectations, processes, communications, and support for principals and schools
- Autonomy over staffing. This was a complex issue where most participants who discussed staffing and autonomy wanted to be able to hire and appoint new staff members, but the majority of them did not want the power to terminate underperforming staff members. The most frequent recurring response in relation to underperforming staff members was that participants wanted clearer systemic processes and support structures in place to support and develop staff members who were struggling to perform their roles. This work currently often falls directly to the principal and participants described it taking a considerable amount of energy and focus. They noted preference for centralised support, with oversight and input from each school, for the development of teachers who were placed on performance conditions.
- Participants continually referred to working 'within set parameters'. There was a desire for clarity about those parameters so that principals know, clearly, what decisions they have the authority to make to meet local needs.

The quotations below provide a snapshot of some of the recurring themes in relation to principals' survey responses about autonomy in an ideal scenario:
- *Autonomy is to be innovative; achieve goals set and build a sense of hope for all who are at my school (staff, students and parents) while living within the confines of our system.*
- *My [regional supervisor] would be my coach (as opposed to a supervisor) to assist me with moving the school forward. I would have professional supervision (to de-brief) to support my psychological wellbeing. If I make a mistake or fail, I [would be] supported to make sure that it is not repeated.*
- *While we work for a system (Public education) there are processes, procedures and policies that support safety, accountability and layers of supervision that stifle/hamper true autonomy. But all is not lost, Principal autonomy in an ideal world would be where there would be more support in the administration role of Principals (someone else to "do" the myriad reports etc.; less top down requirements from immediate supervisors (for experienced Principals), (less ticking boxes and fewer check lists); and more time for the Principal to develop each teacher/staff member with the knowledge, skills and understanding to have and make choices in how they do their role.*
- *Principals would be able to delegate operational tasks, direct reports to follow guidelines, be trusted with decision making without being challenged by regional officers, able to decide how to spend their time, being able to direct work within the*

school without being challenged industrially or otherwise by staff, being able to focus 80%+ of time on student wellbeing and outcomes, and engaging with community.

- *Principal autonomy would be characterised by the freedom and flexibility to engage and deliver learning, both curriculum and personal development at an age appropriate level at a site that reflects local community expectations and national benchmarks. Such autonomy would correspondingly be supported by regional and central office personnel either by direct or requested assistance in order to meet these outcomes.*

Recommendation

There are a number of issues that need to be resolved at a policy and systemic level, such as the alignment of understandings and definitions of autonomy at different levels of senior leadership; flexibility and more enacted autonomy in staffing matters, and clarity in definitions and expectations relating to autonomy in different jurisdictions.

However, there are also some concrete actions that could increase principals' confidence in how to exercise their autonomy, recommended below.

Principals should be provided support to participate in structured and ongoing professional learning developed by the jurisdiction and Principals' Associations that addresses key issues relating to autonomy including (but not limited to):
- definitions, expectations and associated accountabilities
- community engagement in autonomous decision-making to meet local needs
- risk identification and mitigation

This professional learning should be targeted and bespoke according to career stage and the relevance of the context of each principal's school. The skills needed by a principal at one school will potentially be different in many aspects to what they need in their next school. Having access to targeted and relevant, high quality and ongoing professional learning will enable them to develop the skills and knowledge needed at different stages of their career path and potentially contribute positively to their retention in the profession.

A suite of high-quality and detailed examples of case studies should be developed, showing different decision-making processes and possibilities for autonomous principals.

ASPA proposes to lead the development of case studies of effective autonomous leadership in public schools around the country. These case studies would be targeted to support principals at different career stages (providing support for beginning principals who have been identified as potentially being less confident in their autonomy), or in different areas of their work (such as finance, staffing, or community engagement) as needed. They would: (a) showcase the work of high-impact leaders and (b) showcase quality structures and processes within the public education system that could be adapted and adopted in other school contexts. Special consideration should be given to showing how these examples work within wider structures – how principals work with staff, students, communities, their own supervisors, school boards or councils, and the education system to achieve these autonomous decisions.

6. Relationships and Autonomy

The importance of principals' relationships with their supervisors was clear. Principals reflected on their relationships with their supervisors and highlighted the importance of:
- Clear communication
- Experience in the same sector (or openness to learning about it)
- A supportive inquiry stance (where supervisors 'walk beside' principals) through their improvement and leadership journeys.[20]

Supervision as an Enabler of Autonomy

Principals' relationships with their supervisors, and the supervision practices adopted by participants' school systems, were significant factors in influencing their perceptions and experience of autonomy; both positively and problematically. The ethical protocols that require data not be compared and contrasted across states and territories does mean that the nuances of these issues are particularly complex in this study, given that there are multiple jurisdictions, each with their own procedures and structures of supervision and authority, performance management, and principal support and development.

Challenges of supervision were frequently raised by principals as areas of concern regarding their perceptions of, and experiences of, their own autonomy to carry out their work. Recurring issues included:
- Perceptions of being micro-managed by some supervisors, effectively negating autonomy
- A sense for some participants that their supervisor did not have sufficient relevant experience to be able to support them (e.g., not an experienced principal, not previously a principal, or not experienced in the same sector or type of school context).

Illustrative quotes from participants are provided below:
- *Supervision is still high and big brother effect with regional and central office checks on all things [via digital technologies]. (Survey respondent)*
- *There is still a very strong expectation that I will make choices that follow the direction of the department or my Regional Director/Assistant Regional Director. (Survey respondent)*
- *I would say I've got a positive relationship with my [supervisor], but there's a power structure at play and the qualities of power are really clear that if I transgress that boundary then there will be no support. But that relationship, that exists and that will always be there, no matter how warm our relationship is and which will just limit my sense of having unquestionable support. (Interview participant)*

More concerning, and recurring frequently within interviews, was an issue of the ratio of supervisors to principals. The number of principals supervised by each senior leader had greatly increased over time, in all contexts in this study, and has meant that supervisors

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[20] Degenhardt discussed 'professional companioning' as a potentially effective model for principals' supervisors to adopt, in: Degenhardt, L. (2013). Professional companioning: Support for leaders in managing the increasing complexity of their roles. *Leading and managing*, *19*(2), 15.

could be overseeing more than 60 schools in some cases. This provides the supervisor with little time to get to know a community and school context, or to invest deeply in the principal's development.

One of the state principals' association presidents reflected on this issue:

> *"You've got some [supervisors] who will visit a school, and I'm not saying a visit to a school is a perfect way of supervising someone, but they might be in a school for four hours a year. They might run across the principal amongst 200 others in a regional meeting, they might have the odd phone call. I'd question whether they know the school. They probably know the data inside out, but do they know the school? [As a supervisor] you might have 50 schools that you supervise, as well as whatever bushfires you have to put out that have popped up everywhere because something's gone wrong in the school, or there's this parent complaint, or whatever it might be." (Interview participant)*

A recurring theme was participants reflecting that their supervisors worked in a more reactive space, and they reported that they are subsequently left to decide whether to 'bother' them to seek support for various issues. There is a paucity of research in this area in Australia, and this is an important finding of this study.[21] If principals are autonomous, they need to have adequate support and development to effectively carry out their work.

Recommendation

The ratio of supervisors to principals should be reduced so that supervisors can spend more time knowing communities and leaders, and developing a deep understanding of the context in which leaders are working.

Findings suggest that supervision structures should take on a 'walking together' partnership model, focusing on the development and support of principals with a long-term career development view.

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[21] For research that has focused on the role of the principal supervisor in Australia, see:
Bloxham, R., Ehrich, L. C., & Iyer, R. (2014). Micropolitical insights into Assistant Regional Directors' leadership in Queensland education. *Leading and Managing*, *20*(1), 32.
Bloxham, R., Ehrich, L., & Iyer, R. (2015). Leading or managing? Assistant regional directors, school performance, in Queensland. *Journal of Educational Administration, 53*(3), 354-373.

7. Effective Policy, Practices, and Structures to Support Principal Autonomy

A key factor in supporting principals to lead autonomously was clarity of: roles and responsibilities; accountability frameworks; and decision-making processes including for:

- principal role
- principals' supervisors' role
- education system support officers and roles

Participants discussed alternative ways of structuring school leadership teams to support more autonomous decision-making and leadership.

- Principals in some states had more autonomy over their leadership team structures felt able to meet their local needs more effectively by directing leadership resources and focus towards pressing issues.
- Principals who had autonomy over the structure of their leadership team felt more able to successfully undertake their work as well as reporting higher levels of job satisfaction and wellbeing.

Given the challenges stated earlier in this report of workload pressures, differing perceptions and experiences of autonomy for different principals, and the expansion of the role of the principal, this final phase of the report shares findings of the structures that principals identified as enablers for autonomy in their schools.

Alternative Structures and Ways of Working as an Enabler for Autonomy

Principals who had autonomy over the structures of their leadership team and wider school staffing structures reported a higher sense of confidence in their ability to do their jobs and to meet local needs. Examples of this included schools who were able to autonomously determine entire staffing structures working from an overall staffing budget, in contrast to schools working within a strictly allocative model of staffing where their staffing profile would be determined by student numbers and other formulas. Some participants commented that restrictive allocative models of staffing stifled their ability to create staffing structures that were flexible enough to meet local needs. One participant, a principals' association representative, commented that "we get staffed now on a very old model – the times, system needs, community needs, and our student needs have changed significantly [since it was devised]".

Examples of the ways principals exercised their autonomy in staffing structures to be able to meet local needs included:

- An Assistant Principal role dedicated specifically to mentoring and developing beginning teachers
- Structuring wellbeing and community engagement into formal leadership roles in schools that served marginalised communities, to strengthen the school's relationship with the community

Importantly, a significant number of the decisions attributed by participants to exercising their autonomy to meet the needs of their communities involved providing additional or targeted support for health and wellbeing of their students and the wider community. This

suggests that schools have taken on greater responsibility for this element of community health, with many leaders discussing the importance of ensuring health and wellbeing concerns are addressed before systemic focuses of school improvement or student academic achievement can be successfully addressed. The comments below provide an illustration of the level of responsibility that schools are taking on in relation to providing community health and wellbeing support and the ways these initiatives are being enabled through principals' autonomy:

- *'What I've done [with autonomy] is I've actually played around with staffing. We've created a head teacher learning and wellbeing position, we've created a Learning and Wellbeing Centre so we can actually have a space for allied services to come in and book a confidential meeting room.' (Interview participant)*
- *We're starting to really break into the Allied health side of support within the school. So, the traditional notion of you have a school counsellor, we're trying to break because we think that from a health perspective that's not supported the young people, so we're really working to employ psychologists, occupational therapists, social workers and support within schools rather than what's traditionally been a teacher with a bit of a counselling knowledge. And I'm trying to really break away from that perspective and really bring health professionals in. So, we're actually getting that strong support and we're knowing that we're not doing harm. (Interview participant)*

This point is particularly important and also links to findings from earlier in this report about principal wellbeing and workload. Research has found that principals who are particularly connected to their communities might be more vulnerable to feeling the stresses of the community.[22] If members of the community are struggling with the types of health, wellbeing, and human services issues described above, there is a possibility that the principal will be emotionally affected as a result of their connection to the community and the deeply interpersonal nature of their work.

Recommendation

The Principal's role needs to be clarified.

> The clarification of the role of principals today needs to take into account the issues of expansion in complexity, intensification, and extension of the role, and ensure that the role is manageable within a reasonable working week. It is likely that roles relating to the Principalship will need to be clarified as well – this might include school leadership teams, principals' supervisors, and system-based support staff.

Exemplar case studies should be provided that show different ways of structuring leadership teams and processes to meet local needs.

> This recommendation relates to the exemplar case studies recommended earlier in this report, providing principals with examples of the possibilities and opportunities for autonomous decision-making that already exist within current policy conditions.

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[22] Beausaert, S., Froehlich, D. E., Devos, C., & Riley, P. (2016). Effects of support on stress and burnout in school principals. *Educational Research*, *58*(4), 347-365.

8. **Methods & Participants**

The case studies of Australian public secondary school principals were undertaken in each of Australia's states and territories.

The methods of data generation within this study included:

- A policy and literature scan
- An anonymous online survey
- Loosely-structured remote (telephone) interviews lasting between 40-90 minutes

Photo by Allie Smith on Unsplash

Responses from the anonymous survey resulted in themes and areas of further inquiry that were explored in depth in the subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed through Braun and Clarke's process of thematic analysis, a multi-stage process of data analysis.[23] Interview recordings were transcribed and analysed to generate recurring patterns of meaning, or themes, which were then refined into the key findings shared within this report.

Participants

235 participants took part in the project.

172 completed the anonymous online survey, and 63 participated in telephone interviews.

Of those 63 telephone interviews, 3 were with senior leaders within education systems around the country. The remaining interview participants were principals and members of the ASPA executive committee (either current principals, or principals on secondment to executive roles in state-based principals' associations).

Due to some ethical approval conditions, we are unable to specify the number of participants from each state and territory nor to compare and contrast data from different jurisdictions. We note, however, that all states and territories are represented within the group of participants.

Survey Participant Demographics

Participant Gender

Participants were asked to identify their gender. 50.5% of participants were men and 49.5% were women.[24]

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[23] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.

[24] 40% of Australia's principals are women. Source: OECD. (2019). Australia – Country Note – TALIS 2018 Results. Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/education/talis/TALIS2018_CN_AUS.pdf

Participant Age

The majority of respondents were aged between 45-54 (41%) and 55-64 (40%).[25]

Experience as Principal

Answer	%
Less than 5 years	25.26%
5-9 years	25.26%
10-14 years	22.11%
15-19 years	13.68%
20-29 years	11.58%
30+ years	2.11%
Total	100%

Participants' School Contexts

Answer	%
Metropolitan	42.57%
Regional	31.68%
Rural	13.86%
Remote / Isolated	2.97%
Independent Public School	7.92%
Distance Education	0.99%
Total	100%

Challenges and Limitations

This study was not designed to generalise about principals' experiences and views across the country. As such, there is a larger representation of some states and territories depending on their involvement in ASPA and their engagement with the project. Further, ethical approvals in some jurisdictions required data to not be used to compare states and territories. The experiences and insights of principals presented within this report are intended to generate nuanced illustrations of the work of principals in Australian public secondary schools today, while recognising that principals are working within different local policy contexts and conditions. The study focused on ASPA's membership (public secondary school principals) and future research will investigate similar issues in other school settings.

Two major events impacted on the fieldwork for this study: the Australian bushfires of 2019-2020, and the COVID-19 global pandemic.

2019-2020 Australian Bushfires

The 2019-2020 bushfires impacted particularly on the project as recruitment and fieldwork of participants in NSW and Victoria was scheduled to take place in more depth in Term 4 2019 and Term 1 2020.

COVID-19 Global Pandemic

This global event saw schools move to virtual delivery, with principals placed under immense pressure to lead their school communities during a period of global unrest and uncertainty.

The project team recognised that it would not be appropriate to continue conducting fieldwork given the pressures facing schools during this time. The decision was made to conclude the fieldwork portion of the project and finalise the data analysis as a result.

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[25] The average age of principals in Australia is 51 years old, and 19% of Australia's principals are aged 60 or over. The demographics of participants who responded to this survey are generally reflective of this. Source: OECD. (2019). Australia – Country Note – TALIS 2018 Results. Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/education/talis/TALIS2018_CN_AUS.pdf