



## SCHOOL LEADER WELLBEING

# Supporting School Leaders to Flourish

A report for the Australian Primary School Principals Association & the Australian Secondary School Principals Association

APRIL 2023

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## Forewords

If recent years have taught us anything, it is that events occur in our lives that are well beyond our control and that the best use of our time and effort is to focus on what we can control. We have known for many years that school leaders are experiencing levels of stress and worklife imbalance that are often untenable. We also know that every day leaders prioritise quality leadership of teaching and learning, sometimes at the expense of their own wellbeing.

I believe that being solutions-focused and future-oriented is the way forward for our profession. Continuing to talk about the problem has not yet yielded the positive outcomes for school leaders, educators, students and parents that we urgently require in these challenging times.

This insight into School Leader Wellbeing and the practices that support leaders in schools to flourish was intended to start more balanced and well-rounded discussions about what is working in this space. Directing our attention towards positive changes we can all make to improve our own wellbeing offers the potential of a hopeful future rather than a dystopian conclusion.

And a hopeful present is essential for a hopeful future if we are going to continue to shape lives and support young people to realise their dreams and aspirations. We want to inspire the next generation of school leaders to embrace a rewarding profession that leaves a genuine and lasting legacy. This needs to be one from a position of strength and wellbeing where school leaders actively support themselves and their leadership teams to live a whole of school wellbeing ethos.

Even if you only have time to read the summary and action points from this research, please take a moment to reflect on your wellbeing and how you can invest in, refresh and recharge yourself today.

**GRAEME FEENEY**

Executive Officer

Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)

School leaders, and educators, are acutely aware of the challenges, concerns and difficulties present across our educational and societal landscapes. I feel that we have talked about these problems in great detail over many decades and the way forward is not mired in deficit thinking.

This project on School Leader Wellbeing seeks to offer not only a counterpoint to what is often a negative discourse but to provide hope. It is evident that some school leaders are finding ways to thrive and flourish. This does not mean they exist in a constant state of optimism across every aspect of wellbeing but that they are experiencing wins, acknowledging successes and making positive progress.

The School Principal and leadership team set the standards for the school. Our recent experience with Covid-19 highlighted the pivotal role of school leaders in supporting students, teachers and parents to navigate through uncertain and unsettling times. Of course, for many, this focus on others comes at a cost and the cumulative emotional and psychological burden now weighs heavily on many leaders, significantly compromising their personal wellbeing.

If school leaders are not experiencing a state of personal wellbeing, how can they be expected to effectively support students, teachers and parents? I believe it is also impossible for school leaders to realise their strategic vision for their school community if their wellbeing is in a state where they can no longer see the wood or the trees.

I invite you to read our snapshot of School Leader Wellbeing in conjunction with the School Leader Resources and do two things. Firstly, give yourself permission to take care of your personal wellbeing so you can lead your school community from a position of psychological and emotional strength. Let me reassure you that this is definitely not a sign of weakness, rather profound strength in leadership. And secondly, take one action step today to enhance your wellbeing no matter how big or small that may be.

We need to work with and through each other, across our professional and personal networks to achieve the goals we set for ourselves and our school communities. As such, I hope that this is the start of many genuine and open conversations about the critical importance of school leader wellbeing.

**ANDREW PIERPOINT**

President

Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA)

### Summary

- School leaders are finding ways to thrive and flourish in challenging times.
- School leadership is meaningful, positive work where leaders have the confidence and autonomy to effectively fulfil their role.
- School leaders feel connected to their school community but do not always have the professional support they need to develop as a leader.
- Self care is important to school leaders however it is the area where they are least likely to agree that they are taking positive action to care for themselves.
- Whole of school wellbeing requires a holistic approach that includes students, staff and school leaders. School leaders cannot be expected to support student and staff wellbeing and not make their own wellbeing a priority.
- A sustained commitment to school leader wellbeing is necessary to drive whole of school wellbeing.
- School leaders require objective guidance so they can make informed, evidence based decisions about how they can efficiently and effectively improve their personal and professional wellbeing

### Action points

- Consider where school leader wellbeing fits in a whole of school wellbeing strategy and how a holistic approach to wellbeing can become embedded in the daily practice of the school community.
- Ensure that the responsibility for prioritising wellbeing is shared across the school community to maintain momentum
- Share successes, helpful resources and wellbeing strategies with other school leaders.
- Many school leaders must prioritise self-care and model these behaviours to the school community. Identify small changes or habits that can be made immediately and used as a foundation for broader change.
- Use an evidence-based approach to monitoring whole of school wellbeing to celebrate where school leaders, staff & students are thriving and to identify areas for attention.
- Make active use of the Toolkit compiled by ASPA and APPA on school leader wellbeing [available here](#).

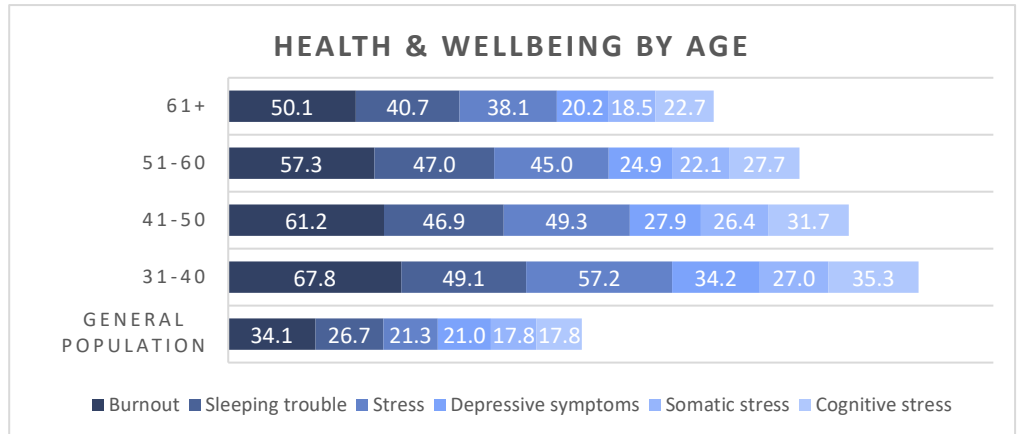
## 1. Policy perspectives on school leader wellbeing

### The critical importance of school leader wellbeing

Principal turnover has serious consequences for student achievement, community engagement, and teacher satisfaction and retention. Estimates of the direct economic cost of turnover vary, but are suggested to be anywhere between \$40,000-\$75,000 per principal, with more general estimates from turnover research taking the possible figure to more than \$200,000 per person (Boyce & Bowers, 2016; Hom et al., 2017). Australian research has shown that principals are overworked and at serious risk of stress and burnout, which has direct connections to the likelihood of higher principal turnover and attrition (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020; Beausaert et al., 2016). Australia’s context echoes global research which emphasises high levels of stress and burnout in principals (Beausaert et al., 2016; Mahfouz, 2020) and has focused increasingly on issues of principal turnover (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018).

Since 2011, the Australian Principal Occupational Health & Wellbeing Survey has collected information about the quality of life and psychosocial coping measures employed by school leaders to assess occupational health, safety and wellbeing. School leaders have consistently reported high levels of satisfaction in relation to workplace commitment, the meaningfulness of their work and self-efficacy (See et al 2022). Perceived burnout was the highest since the inception of the survey and new principals had substantially lower health and wellbeing results when compared with more experienced principals. These concerns about the wellbeing of our educators are not new and are well documented in the research literature.

As shown below, when reported burnout, difficulties sleeping, stress, depressive symptoms, somatic stress (focus on physical symptoms) and cognitive stress are added together, school leaders are clearly experiencing higher levels of distress than the general population. Principals aged 40 and under are reporting levels of negative impact that are substantially higher than their counterparts in other ages groups.



Source: See et al 2022, Australian Principal Health & Wellbeing Occupational Survey

School leaders, especially those who are relatively new to leadership roles, need to prioritise their health and wellbeing so that they can effectively and genuinely drive whole of school wellbeing. These leaders need to put their oxygen masks on first before they can help others.

There are many lessons to be learned about wellbeing from within the school leadership community as some principals are not only surviving in challenging times but are thriving. Starting the discussion about what works to support school leaders to thrive across all aspects of wellbeing throughout their professional careers is a critical next step in taking action to strengthen our education communities.

### Jurisdictional perspectives on school leader wellbeing are broadly consistent

While the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework (2020) identifies leadership, specifically principals and school leaders, as one of the five key elements of Wellbeing Framework, there is no national or overarching guidance about how school leader wellbeing can be enhanced or optimised.

School leader policy positions or frameworks could not be found in the public domain for New South Wales, Western Australia, and South Australia. The ACT Education Directorate makes reference to a Principal Health and Wellbeing Plan based on nine recommendations from the Principal Wellbeing in ACT Public Schools Report however neither of these documents was available.

Based on the strategies, plans and frameworks available for Northern Territory, Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria, principal wellbeing is generally conceptualised across three broad domains: psychological (including mental, emotional and spiritual), physical and social. It is a dynamic state viewed on a continuous spectrum from suffering to flourishing across each domain.

Wellbeing, in this context is achieving a state where the school leader has the capacity to meet the challenges presented by the school environment using internal and external resources and support mechanisms.

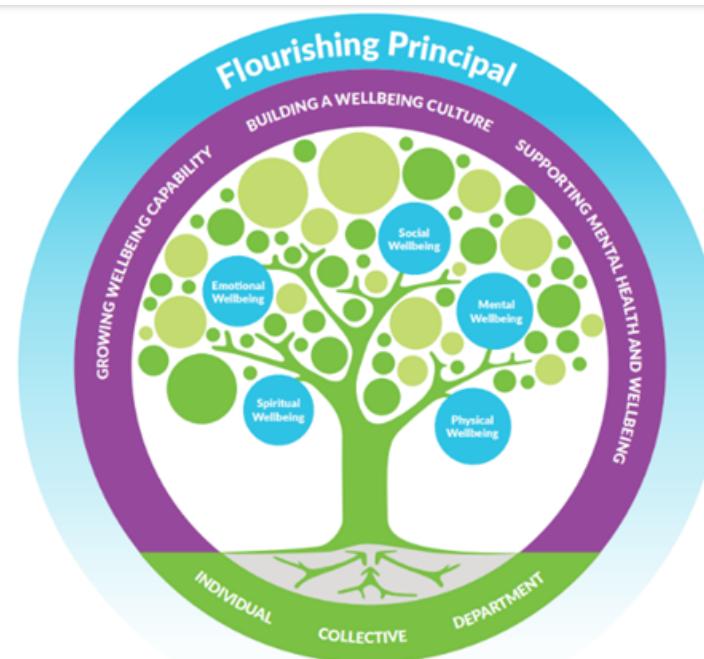
Enhancing and supporting principal wellbeing is similarly multidimensional and range from remedial for those who are 'suffering' or 'languishing' to early intervention for those who are 'coping' through to preventative for principals who are 'performing' or 'flourishing'.

Key features of jurisdictional principal wellbeing strategies for Northern Territory, Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria are summarised below.

### Northern Territory

Developed by Northern Territory Department of Education in partnership with the Northern Territory Principals' Association, the Education NT Principal Wellbeing Framework (2019) emphasises a holistic, system-wide approach to ensure strong teams around the school leader in addition to practical operational support.

As illustrated below, the focus of the framework is on creating an environment where wellbeing is prioritised and school principals are able to flourish.



## Supporting School Leaders to Flourish

The NT framework takes into account the complexities of leading schools in remote and very remote locations and the need for a range of wellbeing resources and strategies that will be required to meet differing needs. There is also an acknowledgement that leader wellbeing exists in context and that building a wellbeing culture and growing wellbeing capability while supporting mental health and wellbeing are critical enablers of whole of school wellbeing.

### Queensland

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2020) was developed by Queensland Government Department of Education after a multi-stage consultative process with school leaders.



The Strategy aligns with the broader *Staff Wellbeing Framework*, focusing on “continuous improvement”, and priority to “support the health, safety and wellbeing of our people in every workplace” within *Department of Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023*. The Staff Wellbeing Framework identifies five interdependent dimensions including:

- Physical
- Psychological
- Occupational
- Social & Community Engagement, and
- Financial.

An eight point action plan, addressing four key pillars (Optimising Time to Lead, Support Services, Promoting a Safe and Respectful Workplace and Capability, was expanded into a 15 point plan for 2021-22. Programs such as the wellbeing coaching program and the stress and resilience program were continued in this cycle. Key additions to the action plan relating to clarity, timely and proactive support in a number of areas such as HR, integrity and professional development. This plan also acknowledges that experienced school principals require different wellbeing supports to those who may be newer to a leadership role.

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy was specifically designed to offer an incremental approach that could be refined and enhanced as part of an annual action planning process. The 2022-2023 Action Plan does not appear to be available in the public domain.

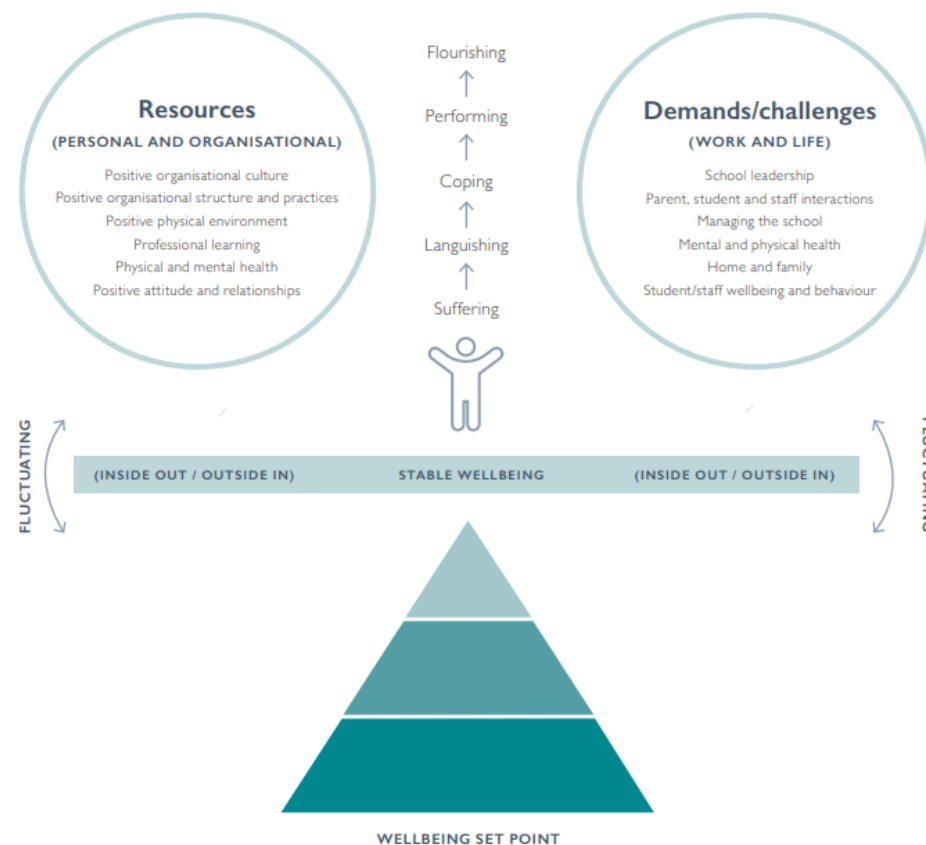
### Tasmania

The Principal Wellbeing Action Plan (2019) was a key outcome from an extended consultation process based on the Principal Wellbeing Discussion Paper (2018). Developed by the Tasmania Department of Education, the plan conceptualises wellbeing on a continuum where the school leader is seeking to achieve a state of balance using resources and supports to effectively address challenges.

This framework speaks to the needs of new and experienced principals building both their personal wellbeing tools, establishing mentoring connections, increasing day to day supports while having a longer term view of the overall school leadership team.

The action plan acknowledges the importance of a holistic approach to wellbeing in schools and that Principal wellbeing needs to be viewed in conjunction with the Department’s Child and Student Wellbeing Strategy and the overall DoE staff wellbeing framework. While DoE appears to be actively pursuing student wellbeing initiatives, it is unclear whether the Principal Wellbeing Action Plan was updated after 2021.

A Conceptual Model for Understanding the Dynamic State of Principal Wellbeing

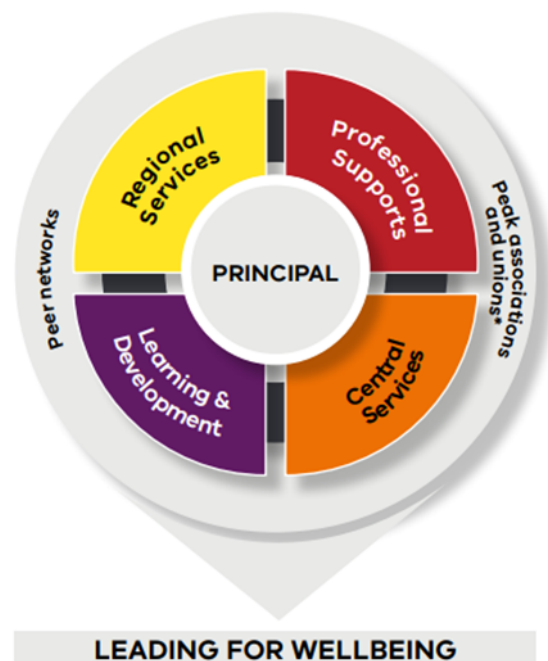




### Victoria

The Victorian Department of Education and Training developed the Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2021 using an evidence-based approach and an extensive consultation process with school leaders.

The strategy was explicitly aligned with Whole of Victorian Government (WoVG) Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter from March 2017 and with Australian Professional Standards for Principals.



The Victorian strategy offers an integrated framework with an emphasis on a system-wide holistic approach to supporting principal wellbeing. This approach also acknowledges that wellbeing exists on a spectrum from struggling to flourishing.

A number of wellbeing supports were identified including regional services, central services, learning and development, professional supports, peer networks/peak associations/unions, and principals themselves. Seven pilot initiatives were funded across a range of areas such as mentor programs and health checks.

The strategy may have been updated or refreshed after 2022 however this information is not available in the public domain.

### Prioritising school leader wellbeing & maintaining momentum

Based on the available information, it is evident that there is a genuine acknowledgement that the wellbeing of school leaders needs to be prioritised to so that they can thrive, flourish and support their staff and students to achieve the ultimate goal of whole of school wellbeing.

There appears to be an excellent foundation for the successful delivery of strategies and initiatives aimed at improving and sustaining principal wellbeing but it is unclear whether momentum has been maintained in recent years.



## 2. Enhancing wellbeing & supporting school leaders to flourish

Pivot Professional Learning was commissioned by ASPA & APPA to explore the various domains of wellbeing with a specific emphasis on the flourishing and thriving end of the wellbeing continuum. A key aim of the project was to provide data to inform efforts to continuously strengthen wellbeing support for Australia’s principals and to offer insight into how to best differentiate wellbeing support and professional learning opportunities.

Based on a review of the literature on school leader and educator wellbeing undertaken by Pivot PL (unpublished, 2022), eight potential wellbeing domains were identified. Understanding these factors could support school leaders and individual staff members when developing or refining plans that enhance educator wellbeing. The wellbeing factors don’t stand in isolation and can overlap.

1. Self-efficacy
2. Enjoyment
3. Connectedness
4. Autonomy
5. Positive emotional affect
6. Supportive school environment
7. Meaning & purpose
8. Self care

Each of these school leader & educator wellbeing factors is described on the following page.

## School leader wellbeing survey

To understand the extent to which school leaders are experiencing wellbeing within their school community, Pivot surveyed school leaders across Australia. We asked them about wellbeing across the eight domains and the types of resources and supported that assisted them to improve and enhance their wellbeing.

Survey links were distributed via email and social media by ASPA & APPA to their member lists in October 2022. Pivot also invited school leaders on our internal databases to take part in the project.

We received 126 detailed responses from school leaders across the country (see Table 1).

Table 1: Pivot survey of School Leaders

	Number of responses	%
Principal	92	73.0
Deputy/Assistant Principal	24	19.0
Head/Lead Teacher	2	1.6
Other	8	6.3
Primary	70	55.6
Secondary	20	15.9
Combined	24	19.0
Other	12	9.5
Early career (1-5 years)	24	19.2
Mid-career (6-15 years)	52	41.6
Later career (16 plus years)	49	39.2

### Factor 1: Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a belief in one's competence. Feelings of competence contribute to positive wellbeing. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that as educators's self-efficacy increases, burnout decreases (Zee and Koomen, 2016). Improved self-efficacy further improves workplace resilience so that educators don't give up in the face of obstacles.

### Factor 2: Enjoyment

High levels of enjoyment at work is one factor that positively contributes to wellbeing. Enjoyment, or the experience of having positive experiences related to working life, is one of the critical components to engagement at work. Employees with higher engagement report greater job satisfaction, and engagement can be considered the opposite of burnout.

### Factor 3: Connectedness

Positive interactions and social support from members across the school community (colleagues, families, and students) is important for both school leaders and teachers to have positive wellbeing at work. Importantly, the following connectedness constructs particularly contribute to positive wellbeing in a school: educator-student connectedness; educator- family trust; peer collaboration; and supportive colleagues.

### Factor 4: Autonomy

Autonomy refers to the amount of control and agency teachers and school leaders have on their practice. Greater workplace autonomy leads to increased engagement, and engagement is a key condition for wellbeing within positive psychology. Evidence indicates that increased workplace autonomy for school leaders leads to consistently positive outcomes including job satisfaction and job commitment.

### Factor 5: Positivity

Positive emotions go beyond happiness and include hope, joy, compassion, and gratitude. These positive emotions indicate when someone is flourishing and can be cultivated to improve wellbeing (Fredrickson, 2001). When educators have the opportunity to both savour these positive emotions in daily life and visualise them in future life, wellbeing and resilience can improve.

### Factor 6: Supportive School Environment

Research across industries shows that a workplace environment can positively or negatively impact worker wellbeing, job satisfaction and performance. Fundamental to employee wellbeing is that staff need to feel physically and psychologically safe.

### Factor 7: Meaning & purpose

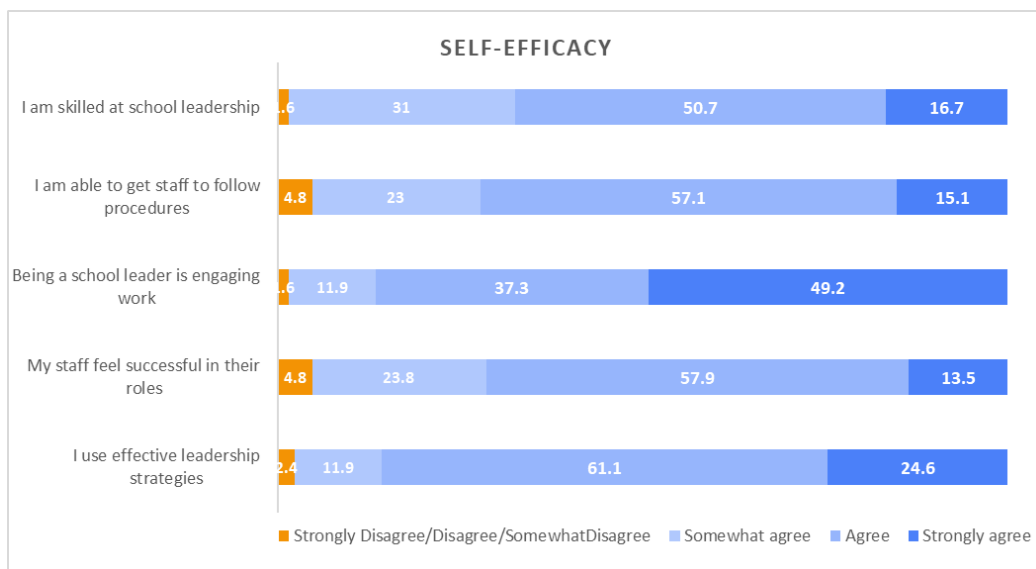
Believing that one's work has meaning, or a sense of purpose, is a fundamental element of many frameworks of wellbeing. Having purpose is defined much like altruism or using your strengths in order to benefit something greater than yourself (Kun et al., 2017). Many teachers' commitment to their work is driven by purpose (Song et. al, 2020), and this purpose positively contributes to joy, enthusiasm, resilience and attrition.

### Factor 8: Self care

Regular physical activity is a natural mood lifter, is a protective factor against stress and tension, and can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. When you get enough sleep, you have better control over your emotions, manage stress and work difficulties, and improve mood. Thus, physical health and wellness must underpin educators' personal responsibility to improving wellbeing whilst at work.

## Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a person's belief that they have the ability to meet challenges, complete tasks or achieve goals. School leaders were asked to indicate the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with a series of statements relevant to self-efficacy.



Notes: Data is shown for 126 respondents. Strongly Disagree, Disagree and Somewhat Disagree responses have been combined.

Based on the feedback from the survey, school leaders feel competent and confident that they can meet the demands of their role. They are overwhelmingly engaged in their work with almost half of the respondents (49.2%) strongly agreeing with this statement. Confidence was also high in relation to the use of effective leadership strategies.

Self-efficacy lessened slightly when school leaders thought about their staff and more practical leadership skills. While the majority still agreed with the statements, about staff and skills, the strength of agreement softened in comparison to other areas where they felt a greater level of confidence.

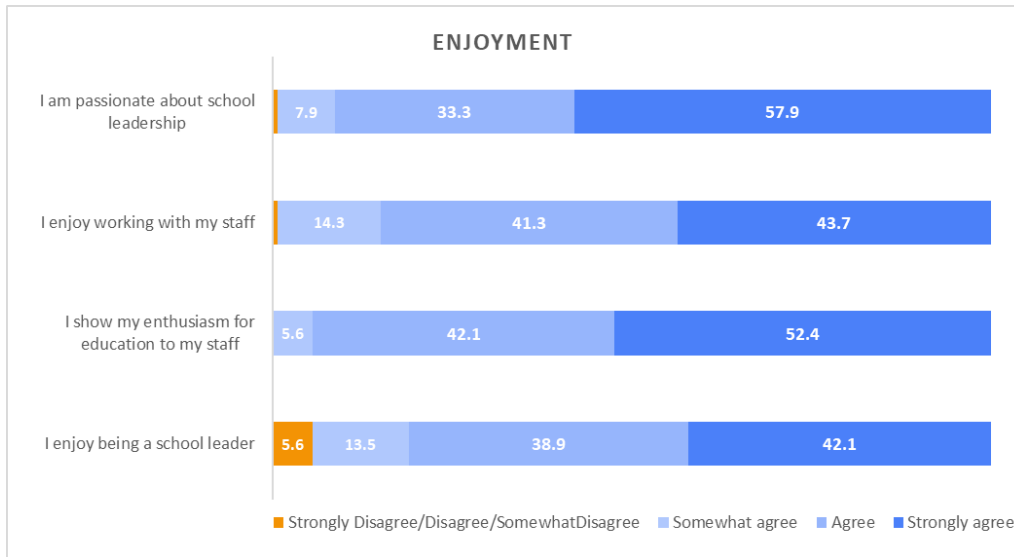
The small number of school leaders who expressed some level of disagreement with two or more statements could potentially benefit from personalised follow-up with suggestions about actions they could take to improve their feelings of self-efficacy. For this group of school leaders, the confidence to lead staff appears to be an area of improvement, however, this does not apply to the vast majority of survey respondents.



QELi courses and programs are one example of supports mentioned by school leaders as increasing their feelings of self-efficacy. QWLi is a peak professional leadership institute committed to delivering excellence in leadership by supporting school and education leaders to establish a strong vision, improve student outcomes and lead change in school and the wider school communities. They have a particular focus on wellbeing and resilience.

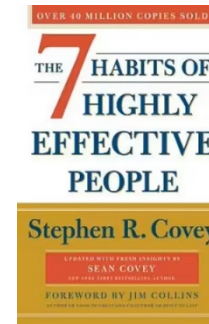
## Enjoyment

Enjoyment, or having positive experiences related to working life, is a critical component of workplace engagement. School leaders were asked about a number of factors that contribute to enjoyment in the workplace.



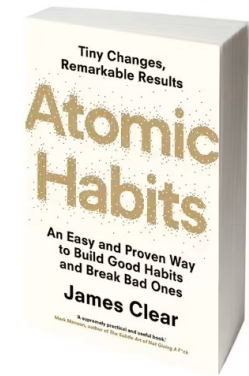
Notes: Data is shown for 126 respondents. Strongly Disagree, Disagree and Somewhat Disagree responses have been combined.

Overwhelmingly, school leaders reported that they are passionate, enthusiastic and enjoy working with their staff with more than 9 out of 10 expressing agreement with these items. Enjoyment related to being a school leader was slightly lower but still very positive.



School leaders made a number of suggestions about professional reading and books that they felt had contributed to them having positive experiences in the workplace. These two publications are examples of

some of the generalist reading material that school leaders reported had contributed to improving their wellbeing in the workplace.



## Connectedness

Positive interactions and social support across the school community (colleagues, families, and students) is critical for both school leaders and teachers to experience wellbeing at work.

School leaders reported connected and positive relationships with staff and parents or carers with almost all respondents expressing agreement with these statements. Relationships with staff were overwhelmingly good and collaborative and school leaders felt like they lead the school community.

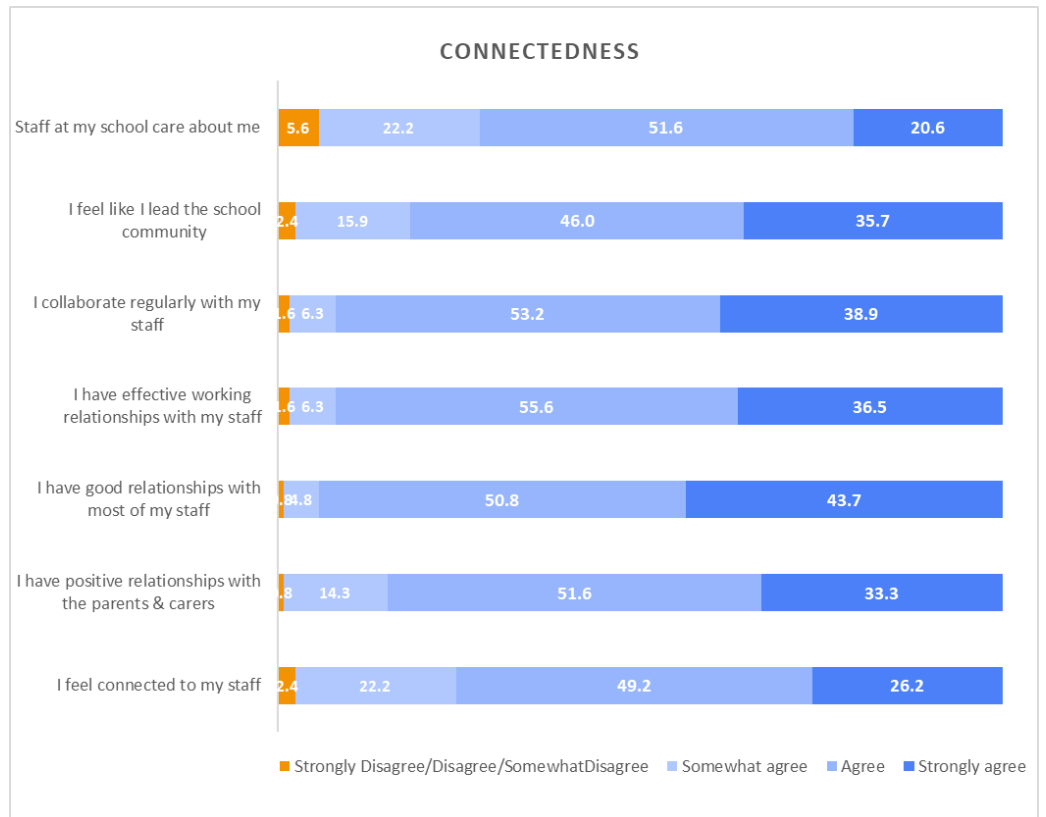
The lowest levels of agreement were reported in relation to staff caring about the school leader with only one in five strongly agreeing that this was the case.

When asked about supports that had facilitated connectedness across the school community, the program for Newly Appointed Principals is an example of one of the resources mentioned. This program provides an



opportunity for principals, typically in their first three years of service, to develop the skills they need to

ensure positive academic and behavioural outcomes for their students and establish a climate that values effective teaching and teachers.



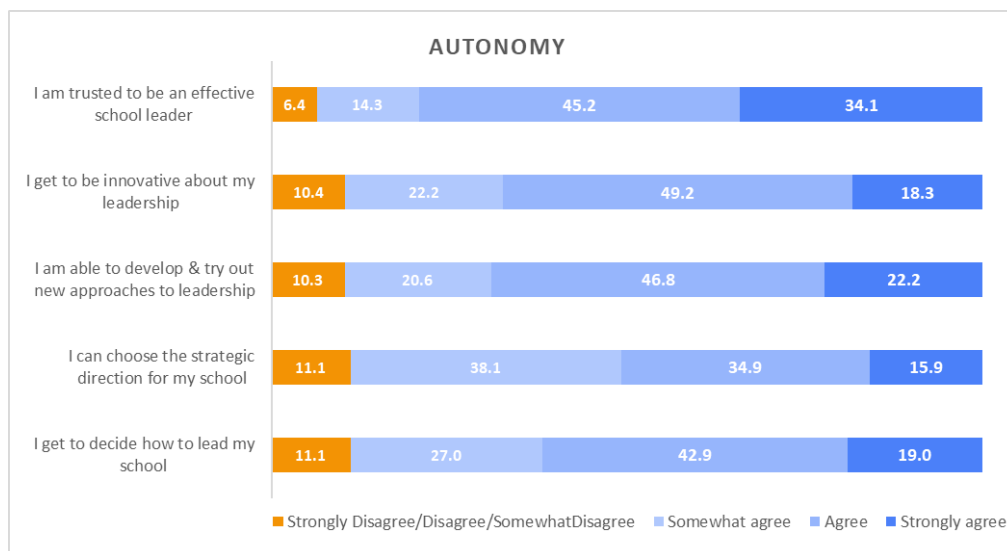
Notes: Data is shown for 126 respondents. Strongly Disagree, Disagree and Somewhat Disagree responses have been combined.

## Autonomy

Autonomy refers to the amount of control and agency teachers and school leaders have on their practice and is regarded as a key contributor to wellbeing.

While school leaders expressed consistently high levels of self-efficacy or belief in their ability to lead effectively, they were less likely to agree with statements related to the extent to which they had the flexibility they had to implement their leadership practice.

Around one in ten school leaders disagreed that they were able to be innovative (10.4%), try out new approaches to leadership (10.3%), choose the strategic direction of the school (11.1%) or even make active decisions about how to lead their school (11.1%).



Notes: Data is shown for 126 respondents. Strongly Disagree, Disagree and Somewhat Disagree responses have been combined.

Perceptions of trust were reassuringly high with more than a third of school leaders (34.1%) strongly agreeing that they felt trusted to be an effective school leader.

One resource offered by school leaders as supporting their ability to express their autonomy was the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT). This tool, developed by the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) this tool combines findings from international research and practical guidance, to create solutions for school communities.

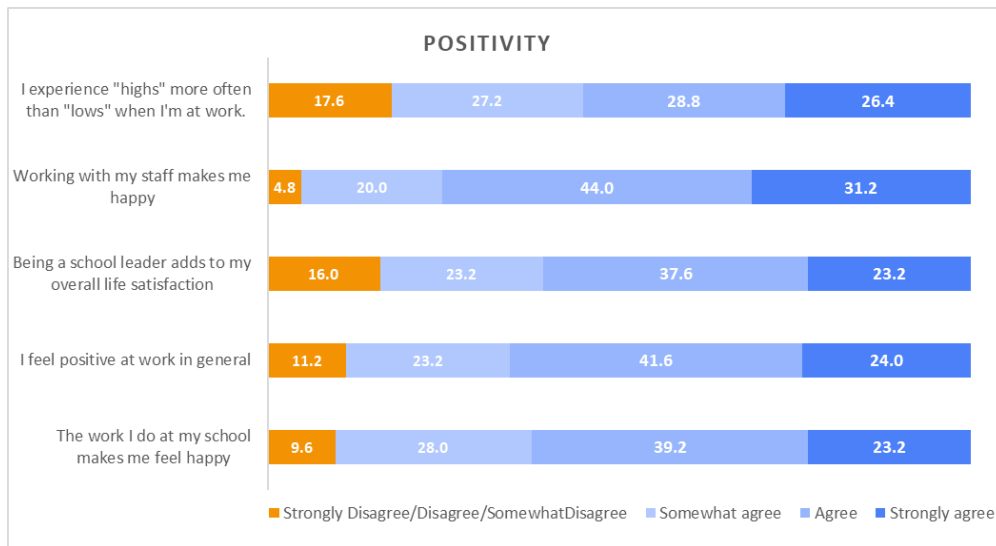
The NSIT consists of nine interrelated ‘domains’. Although the tool has been designed to enable a judgement in relation to each domain separately, experience suggests that the most effective way to use the tool is to make observations and gather evidence broadly about a school’s practices before focusing on individual domains. Schools may then decide to give priority to particular domains in their improvement efforts.



## Positivity

Educators who have the opportunity to experience positive emotions in daily life and anticipate experiencing them in the future can exhibit increased levels of wellbeing and resilience.

In general, while school leaders reported that they enjoyed working with the school community, they were not necessarily experiencing positive emotional affect in their work environment.



Notes: Data is shown for 126 respondents. Strongly Disagree, Disagree and Somewhat Disagree responses have been combined.

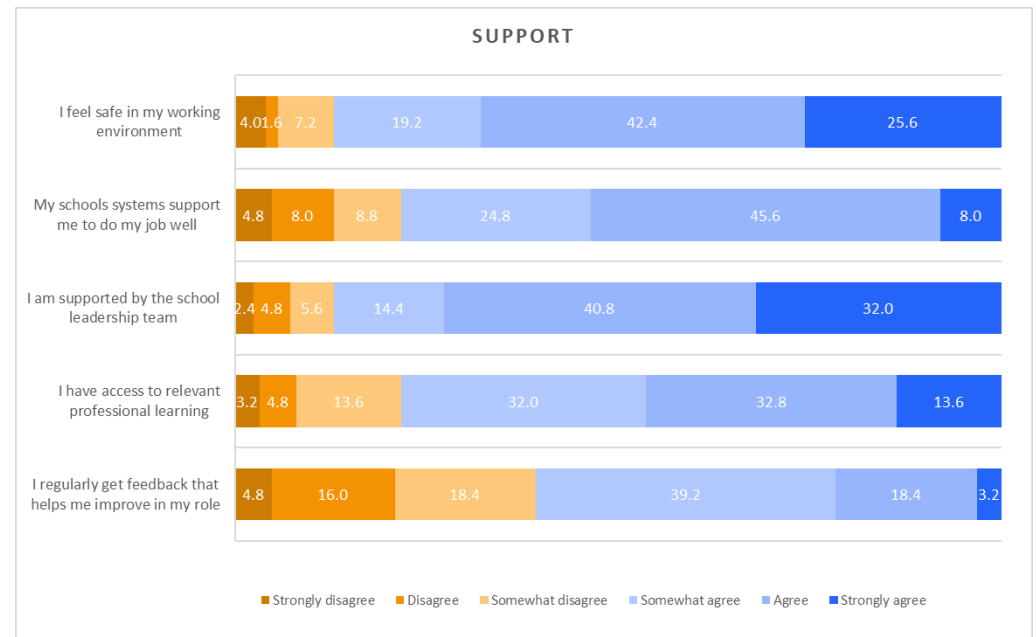
Almost one in five school leaders (17.5%) disagreed that they experienced more 'highs' than 'lows' at work and slightly fewer (16.0%) disagreed that being a school leader contributed to their overall life satisfaction. While nine out of ten school leaders feel positive at work in general, one in ten

are not experiencing a positive emotional state while leading their school community.

## Support

Feeling physically and psychologically safe and supported is a fundamental component of wellbeing in the workplace.

Just over one in ten (12.8%) disagreed that they felt safe in their working environment, which means a threshold condition to enable a supportive work environment is not being met.



Notes: Data is shown for 126 respondents.



The vast majority of school leaders feel supported by their school leadership team (87.2%) but slightly less supported by school systems (78.4%).

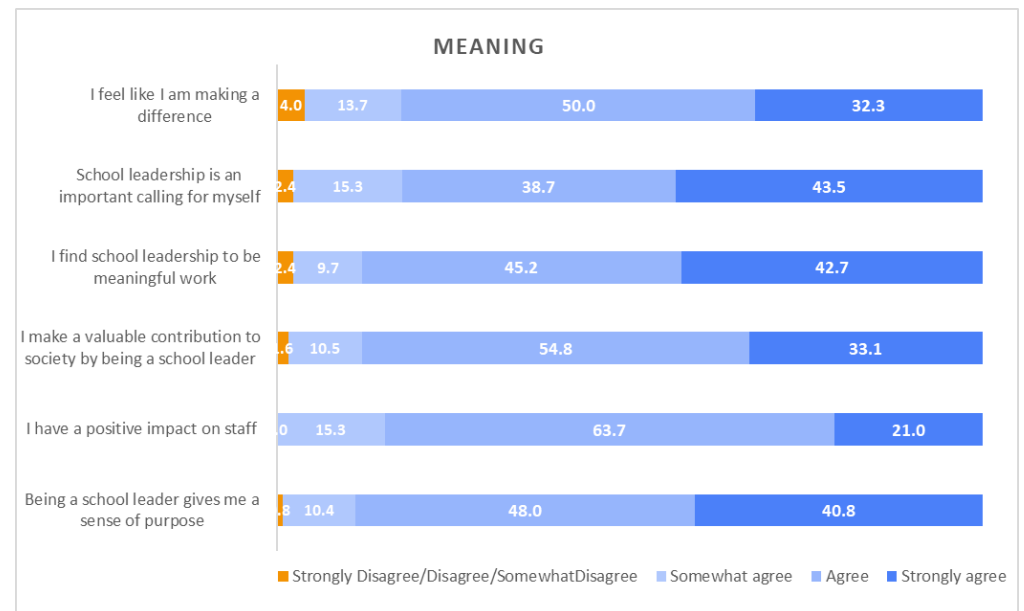
Access to relevant professional learning was a concern for around one-fifth (21.6%) of school leaders and potentially related to the fact that less than two-thirds (60.8%) felt that they regularly received feedback to help them improve in their role.

There are a broad range of conferences and workshop activities offered locally and nationally aimed at improving school leader wellbeing that were commented on in the survey responses.

## Meaning

Believing that one's work has meaning or purpose positively contributes to resilience and wellbeing in the workplace.

School leaders reported a strong sense of meaning and purpose in their work, feeling that they make a valuable contribution to society and their staff. School leadership is regarded by almost all of the school leaders as an important calling where they feel as though they are actively making a difference.



Notes: Data is shown for 126 respondents

## Self-care

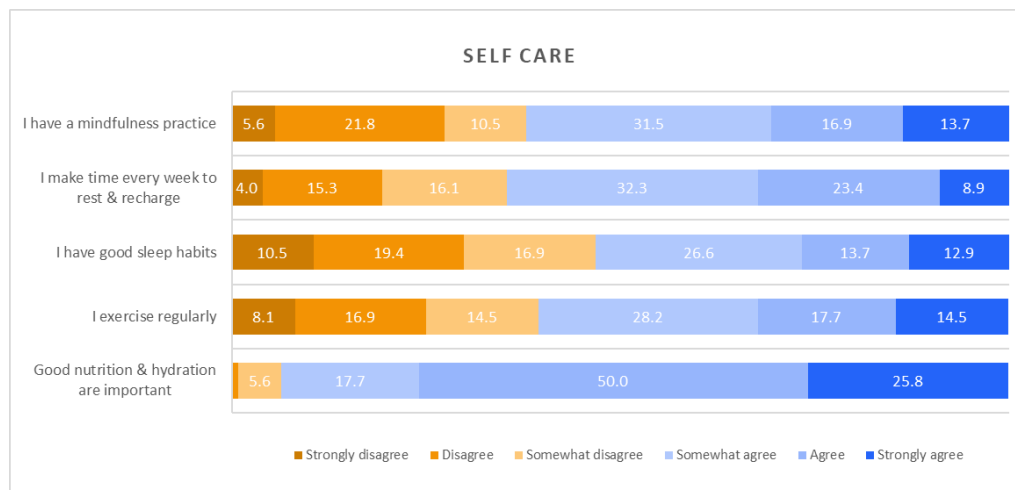
Taking an active role in improving or maintaining health and wellness, especially during times of stress can contribute to an overall feeling of wellbeing.

Three-quarters (75.8%) of school leaders agree that nutrition and hydration are important however it is unknown whether this knowledge is translated into practice.

As is the case with student wellbeing, sleep hygiene seems to be the most challenging aspect of self-care with just under half (46.8%) disagreeing that they have good sleep habits. It is also concerning that more than a third of school leaders are not making time to exercise regularly (39.5%) or to rest and recharge (35.4%), behaviours which can support good health and stress management.

Just under two-thirds (62.1%) of school leaders reported that they have a regular reflective or mindfulness practice. This is a comparatively simple and time-effective action that school leaders could use to prioritise their own self-care on a regular basis.

School leaders who are reporting that they have poor sleep habits and are not currently taking care of their physical health are likely to find it challenging to thrive in other domains of wellbeing. They are also modelling behaviours to both staff and students at their school that suggest self-care is not important. It was suggested by some school leaders that a gym membership or a personal trainer would help them take better care of themselves.



Notes: Data is shown for 126 respondents.

Those school leaders who were actively undertaking self-care mentioned a broad range of practices they had found to be helpful including meditation, yoga and prayer.

The Blissaree Brain Wellness Centre and app is an example of one of the supports used to enhance leader self-care. Evidence-based lessons and tips help people who are feeling depressed, anxious or experiencing self-limiting beliefs. This is a quick, portable resource that can be used flexibly and with a relatively small time commitment.

