

# Lessons from former principals: Possible approaches to mitigating school leader turnover

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## Abstract

Attention is being paid by researchers and policymakers globally to the problem of principal burnout and attrition, caused by rising workloads and stressful conditions. This paper identifies several possible mitigating strategies or practices, drawing on lessons learnt from former school principals about their professional experiences. The paper draws upon a case study of principal attraction and retention in Australia, focusing particularly on survey results from a subset of 56 Australian former school principals. The analysis is theorised through turnover theory, specifically with a lens on the push factors that influenced principals' turnover and attrition. Our analysis shows that principals left the profession due to a perceived lack of support, complexity of the role and overwhelming workload. These are identified as priorities for new policies and practices that better support principals working in an increasingly challenging profession. The paper provides an original contribution to the field through its specific focus on retention and former principals' perspectives. While the paper is focused on Australian principals, their experiences can provide insights into wider patterns being seen in countries with pressurised workloads, increasingly poor principal health and well-being, and subsequent concerns about the attraction and retention of school leaders.

## Keywords

educational leadership, principal retention, headteacher retention, headteacher support, principal support, principal health and well-being, headteacher health and well-being

## Introduction and literature/background

The voices of former school leaders are rarely heard when exploring issues relating to leaders' workloads, their health and well-being, and attraction and retention within the profession. This paper addresses this gap by analysing former school leaders' reasons for leaving the profession. The health and well-being of school leaders is an issue of growing concern around the world (Cousin et al., 2021; Greany et al., 2021; Mahfouz, 2020; See et al., 2022). The intensification of leaders' work, the emotionally intense nature of the role and rapidly shifting policy environments, all combine to create highly pressurised working conditions for education leaders (Courtney et al., 2018; Beusaert et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2022). These have been further exacerbated by the ongoing consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cousin et al., 2021; Greany et al., 2021). This paper reports on a study of former school principals in Australia, but our analysis holds relevance for leadership research internationally, given

evidence of shared policy conditions and global trends within education (Lingard and Sellar, 2013). These trends combine to provide evidence of an emerging crisis in the attraction and retention of school leaders (Cousin et al., 2021; Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2022). Policy efforts towards addressing these issues have focused largely on attracting leaders into the profession, with less emphasis on retaining them (Marks, 2013).

This paper turns attention to issues of retention by providing an analysis of the factors that would have made former leaders – specifically, those who left prior to retirement – remain longer within the role. Little research focuses on former leaders within the current context described above and, in fact, a surprisingly small amount of research has explored turnover from

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the perspectives of those who have left the profession. Almost 30 years ago, Draper and McMichael (1996) explored push factors for headteachers retiring early, which included workload, bureaucracy, loss of job satisfaction, and relational factors. Flintham (2003) explored this issue in depth, noting a need for improved support mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of headship. Writing about principals in the United States, Reames et al. (2014) noted that external mandates and associated pressures were the key reason for retirement, alongside principals wanting to spend more time with their families, though their focus was more on undertaking a comparative study exploring demographics of the profession and factors influencing career decisions. Finally, and much more recently, Zikhali and Smit (2019) examined the reasons for women principals resigning from the profession in South Africa. They found gender-based discrimination, isolation, a lack of support and isolation and loneliness to be key reasons. These studies, undertaken in diverse political and cultural contexts, provide an important background for this paper and all call for improved support for leaders undertaking deeply complex work. This paper provides important nuance in this area by positioning the experiences of Australian leaders within a global policy environment characterised by shared trends and consistent experiences that move beyond the specific context.

Turnover of school leaders (i.e. leaving the role or profession before retirement age) is an important issue that needs to be addressed more explicitly in policy and research. Previous research has shown that principal or headteacher turnover holds negative consequences for student achievement (Miller, 2013) and that it results in higher levels of teacher turnover (Bartanen et al., 2019). Rates of turnover are higher in more complex school communities, and the *effects* of turnover are more pronounced in these communities (Béteille et al., 2012). Evidence has shown that leading ‘challenging’ schools is linked to higher rates of turnover (Grissom and Bartanen, 2019), but there are early signs that issues of attraction and retention are no longer limited to disadvantaged schools, with recent reports of difficulties in filling principal roles in even the most advantaged public schools in Australia which usually have abundant applicants (Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2022).

An important, but often hidden, cost of turnover is for leaders themselves, whose identities intertwine closely with being a leader (Thomson, 2004). When they leave the role unexpectedly or unwillingly (due to ill health or other issues), they must significantly adjust their understanding of who they are. This issue is underdeveloped within the literature, yet we suggest it is an important focus when considering leaders’ health, well-being and sense of professional fulfilment.

This paper provides vital insights into the factors influencing leaders’ decisions to leave the profession prior to retirement, and consequently raises awareness of how better to support leaders. Two potential outcomes arise: first, reducing the effects of future leader turnover and

second, better supporting leaders through addressing ongoing concerns of health and well-being.

## Research methodology and analysis

This paper draws on a subset of data from a wider study that explored attraction and retention for Australian principals. Fieldwork took place in 2021 through an anonymous online survey, interviews and focus groups, all designed to seek the views and experiences of current, aspiring and former principals. This paper focuses specifically on the survey responses from 56 former principals.

These participants responded to questions designed to understand their motivations for becoming school leaders, their experiences when they were leading schools and the reasons for their departure from the profession. Open-ended data were analysed through Braun and Clarke’s (2022) approach to thematic analysis. This was a multi-step process which required us to be immersed in the data by repeatedly reading the responses and searching for patterns of meaning within and across the responses. Themes were generated deductively, using turnover-related notions of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ to help us understand the factors that influenced leaders’ decisions to leave their roles or the profession (such as in ; Boyce and Bowers, 2016; Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Heffernan, 2021; Torres, 2020). Specifically, owing to very few ‘pull’ factors in the data, we explore the ‘push’ factors that affected leaders’ career decisions. ‘Push’ factors are usually negative experiences that *push* someone from a role, in contrast to ‘pull’ factors being new opportunities or better conditions that *pull* someone into the next phase of their career. Initial themes were generated through this process, which were then refined to a smaller number of themes that underpin the forthcoming discussion section.

## Participants and demographics

Thirty-eight of the 56 respondents were men. Forty had been principals in the public/government-school sector, and 27 had been secondary principals. Most had been principals for a lengthy period; the majority fell between 10–14 years (14), 15–19 years (10) and 20–29 years (11). Forty-one respondents were over the retirement age of 65 at the time of responding to the survey, with the rest in the 55–64 age bracket (11), 35–44 (3) and 45–54 (1). The average age of retirement for Australian educators is 60.4 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020), and the OECD (2019) shows the average age of Australian principals as being 51, with almost 20% of principals being over 60, which is very similar to statistics from other OECD nations. Notably, when asked what might have made them stay in the principalship for longer, only 13 respondents selected the option ‘Nothing, I had finished my career at retirement age’. The remaining 43 respondents then provided open-ended text responses that revealed their reasons for leaving the role through resignation rather than planned retirement.

## Analysis and discussion

The forthcoming discussion focuses on the *push* factors identified by leaders – the more negative aspects of the job that *push* someone from a role or the profession, rather than being positive things that *pull* them into new opportunities or better working conditions. Only 13 respondents who left for reasons other than retirement described pull factors; most of these were leaving because of promotion to a ‘system-leadership’ position. Three further principals left for education or leadership-focused positions in private industries, and one noted that they wanted to travel the world with their family. Overwhelmingly, most respondents described push factors, and these form the basis of the forthcoming discussion.

### Lack of support

Respondents cited a lack of systemic and individual support for leaders as one of the reasons they left the role early. Respondents felt inexperienced principals needed better support on transitioning into the role; they also raised specific instances where support was deemed inadequate or unhelpful. These instances included supporting a community after a student’s sudden death, or when community members had become aggressive or violent towards the school leader.

One respondent wished they had asked for support earlier. They were leading their school through numerous changes and had lost leadership-team members to promotions, transfers and parental leave. Nonetheless, being seen to be coping as usual was vital: ‘I thought I couldn’t share this inability of mine [to cope] so kept working harder till “I” broke’. This was juxtaposed with a respondent who asked for support, but whose request was ignored because they were seen to be doing well:

[I would have stayed longer if] the department had provided support of me as an individual and a professional [...] they could have talked with me, heard me, visited me and offered actual support rather than assuming despite my articulation of the opposite that because I was successfully leading that I was successfully surviving.

Importantly, respondents discussed the challenges they faced when ‘support’ concealed increased accountability and control. One respondent described the sense that systemic control was being exerted ‘under the guise of support’ and this sentiment was intertwined with several responses about political interference in leaders’ work. These respondents described their concerns about the effects of the highly bureaucratised education systems in Australia, and that external control and restricted autonomy were reducing their ability to meet the needs of their school community. There was a sense that support and autonomy were closely linked for some respondents, who described the importance of being trusted and supported to function. One respondent described feeling a lack of support from their direct supervisor, as well as inadequate support from

central teams, concluding that ‘I thought I wanted to be a principal until I did the job. Never again’. These conclusions about the importance of support reflect Flintham’s (2003) prior call for improved support mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of the headship in the UK. The importance of support for school leaders has been evident in research globally (e.g. Qian and Walker, 2019; Zikhali and Smit, 2019) and our analysis contributes further insights into the consequences of a lack of perceived support for school leaders. While considerable research highlights the importance of principal support for *teacher* retention (e.g. Hughes et al., 2015; Sokal et al., 2021), gaps remain in our understanding of the impact of support for principals themselves, particularly under highly pressurised contemporary policy conditions.

### Increasing complexity of the role

Respondents described the increasing complexity of the role as another push factor. They described the challenges of dealing with frequent changes and being unable to develop sustainable practices within their schools. For example, one respondent said one of the biggest challenges of their role was ‘Changing policies and direction coming from the changing political landscape. Changes of government and non-educational issues that continued to be forced on schools to adopt’. Similar sentiments were found in other responses. Recent conclusions from Thompson et al. (2022) highlighted the impacts of work intensification and complexity for principals, particularly the consequences for leaders’ ability to prioritise the different aspects of their work in response to frequent change, as well as an increasing responsibility for areas outside their participants’ remit or skills.

The politicisation of schooling was also cited as a reason for leaders to leave the role, with references to ‘political demands’, ‘political tug of war’ and ‘satisfying the political needs of the education department’. Furthermore, increasingly untenable expectations from staff and community members were described by one respondent as ‘unfulfillable’. ‘Bureaucracy’ was depicted as the antithesis of the types of support respondents needed, as well as the reason for their inability to do their preferred type of work. Respondents described ‘constantly fighting the system that resisted change due to bureaucracy’, and the complexity of ‘trying to balance local needs with systemic and bureaucratic requirements’. Alongside these were concerns about challenging relationships with communities and staff members, characterised by an inability to meet increasingly complex student needs with limited resources.

### Overwhelming workload

Alongside the complexity of leadership work, respondents described the sheer workload involved as a push factor that influenced their decision to leave. They described the ‘unrealistic expectations’ of the job, describing the principalship as a ‘24/7 proposition’, with ‘endless meetings after school as well as within school’ and, ‘I was constantly on the computer/mobile, aware that every email needed to be digested

before it was passed on to someone else in the school'. The workload was described as 'death by a thousand cuts', with increasing energy being spent on paperwork, reporting, administrivia, and responding to accountability measures.

Respondents described a tension between the school-leadership work they *wanted* to do and *could* do. For one, the role's biggest challenge was 'finding time to do all the things that I thought that I should do'; another said 'I could always identify additional things which I thought that I should do. It became a matter of prioritising things and turning a blind eye to some matters'. The tension for leaders was also in knowing when – and feeling able – to stop; for example, 'the biggest issue for me was that it was never finished. No matter how hard I worked there was always more. I didn't mind the fact that there was a lot of variation in the various jobs, it was more that I never felt like I could finish'.

The types of work required to lead schools contemporarily were also cited. Respondents disliked having to frequently and reactively manage high-stakes issues. One respondent said, 'it is not just the administrative workload; it is the ongoing crisis management that exacerbates the problem'. Others described the leadership challenge of bearing the weight of responsibility for their school and those within it, with schools being required to do more with less. For example, 'there were times when I had to fill gaps that should have been the responsibility of others, either because they had too much on their plates, or because there wasn't the person for that role – available or funded. Plate-spinning can become tiring and draining, so that the rest of life takes a back seat for a while until the crises lessen – but some years they just don't lessen'. This reflects previous research analysis from De Jong et al. (2017) who argued that principal dissatisfaction in the United States was partly caused by role complexity and workload. We suggest that the workload pressures described by our respondents have similarly negative implications for leaders' health and well-being, to which we now turn.

### *Impact on health and well-being*

The final reported push factor was the negative consequences of school leadership for respondents' health and well-being. Respondents described being 'exhausted', leaving due to combined physical, mental and emotional burnout: 'nervous breakdowns' and 'burnout' were also described in the survey data. Specific and significant bouts of illnesses left some respondents unable or unwilling to continue with the pace and intensity of the work demanded of leaders. Long-term research evidence exists that the health and well-being of leaders in Australia is declining (see e.g. See et al., 2022, 2023). Principalship holds increasingly serious consequences for health and well-being for post-holders, with direct implications for their longevity within the role.

Dismayingly, many responses described instances of physical and verbal aggression or violence towards leaders from community members. This reflects other research in Australian schools (Australian Education Union, 2017) and

highlights educators' safety as a key priority. Respondents also described the job as being 'lonely' and 'isolating', reinforcing the need for effective support. Finally, respondents highlighted the job's toll on their personal relationships, citing their families as a push factor. They no longer wanted to be 'on call day and night' and recognised that 'overworking cost my family [my] attention'. The impact of the principalship on leaders' personal relationships was recently explored in more depth in the Australian context by Heffernan and Mills (2023); this study further evidences the importance of recognising this often-hidden cost. Previous studies have also emphasised the work/family conflict produced by school leadership. For example, Loder (2005) argued that career stage and age influence how women leaders have responded to these demands. Oplatka (2017) argued that principals' heavy workloads similarly impacted upon home/work boundaries, resulting in reduced family time.

These aspects of school-leaders' lives (health and well-being, and consequences for personal relationships) are not yet centred in research nor policy. With leaders' workload increasing, consequences concomitantly arise elsewhere in their lives as they manage increasing imposts on their finite time. Systemic change is needed to reform principals' workloads and ensure that leaders can live whole and meaningful lives both within and beyond their schools.

### **Conclusion**

Our analysis highlights the conditions and practices that influenced leaders' decisions to leave the role. Though the pressures on leaders are well known, this paper provides an empirical contribution to knowledge by focusing specifically on the voices of former leaders, who reached a point of no return and left the profession. Their experiences provide important insights into some of the key issues that need to be addressed to more effectively retain school leaders. Our analysis shows that the role's increasing complexity, alongside the overwhelming workload and a perceived lack of support all combine to have detrimental effects on leaders' health and well-being. These issues have been identified as pressure points by leaders in other countries with similar policy conditions, so our analysis speaks beyond Australia. These aspects of leaders' work, theorised in this paper as push factors, have had a significant consequence on leaders' retention within the profession. The majority of principal respondents noted that they left the role for reasons other than retirement, even those who were near to expected retirement ages. Our analysis therefore offers as an important starting point in considering practices and strategies that might more effectively support and therefore retain leaders. Our analysis offers important considerations for policymakers, with clear areas of attention for future policy directions regarding leaders' work. We suggest that without meaningful steps to address the workload and complexity of school leadership, these pressures may contribute further to leaders' perceptions of

inadequate support and potentially continue to have negative consequences for leaders' health and well-being. We note that this suggestion is neither reducible to, nor necessarily achieved by reducing direct political involvement in headteachers' practice, since the international literature reveals workload issues (e.g. Cousin et al., 2021) in depoliticised contexts (Courtney and McGinity, 2022). In other words, there are many paths that may lead to overwork, and so policy actions require contextualisation. Our analysis also holds implications for the field of education leadership research, regarding the ways we research issues associated with principal attraction and retention. The voices of those who left the profession often go unheard. Given the documented concerns about a shortage of leaders in many countries around the world (see Lee and Mao, 2023), research designed to understand the perspectives of those who have left the profession would provide critical insights into these issues. We note that many countries experiencing these headteacher retention problems have turned to some form of multi-school leadership, often termed 'system' leadership (Courtney and McGinity, 2022; Gurr and Drysdale, 2018). Our analysis and data lead us to suggest that system leadership may well be a solution to a problem that is being misrecognised through what Habermas (1980) would call displacement. We call finally, therefore, for renewed focus on addressing headteacher retention itself rather than on conceptually and structurally bolstering alternatives such as system leadership that only distract from the core issue.


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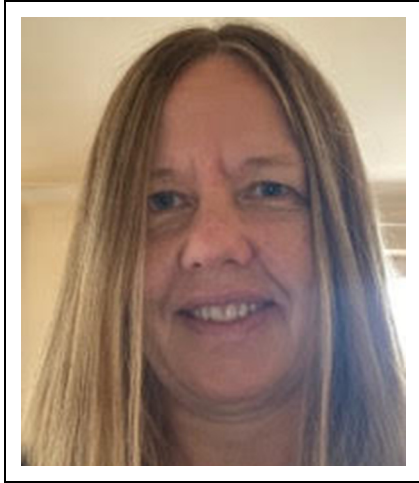
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**Joanne Doherty** is a lecturer in Education in the Manchester Institute of Education. Her research interests include school leader retention, parental engagement, school governance and education policy and her current work focuses on the relationship between these. Joanne adopts a mainly qualitative approach in her research and is particularly interested in the role played by identity and biographies and how these can shape actors' experiences of education. She has considerable experience of teaching in higher education, largely in the areas of education and research methods. She is also a school governor for a federation of infant and junior schools.