



## Principal crisis?

A RECENT SURVEY SUGGESTS THAT THE JOB OF PRINCIPAL IS GETTING HARDER, BUT BEING A PRINCIPAL HAS NEVER BEEN EASY, SAYS DAVID LOADER.

'PRINCIPALS TURN TO BOOZE TO COPE' – so read the headline to an article in the *Age* that reported the findings of a survey by the Australian Secondary Principals Association, Australian Heads of Independent Schools Association and Catholic Secondary Principals Australia. The survey of 1,100 public and private secondary school leaders found that one in five principals are worried about the way they're using alcohol to manage stress. A third reported they had a diagnosed medical problem, such as a cardiac or mental health issue, either caused or exacerbated by the overwhelming workload and job-related stress. Almost half felt they wouldn't be able to cope with the demands of the job for much longer. The report, by the way, was called *The Best Job in the World, With Some of the Worst Days Imaginable*.

Half of all principals feel they do not have a good balance between work and life, a feeling reflected in the broader population. This got me wondering: is the job of principal in particular getting harder, or are we all getting busier in general? Being a principal has never been easy; then again, it's never been easy to be a good teacher, or community leader or even prime minister.

When I think about some principals in the 1970s I remember some who drank too much, some who spent more time at school than with their families and some who had serious work-related medical problems. Back then, these were not public issues. It wasn't really possible to confess to feeling stressed: to do so would be to admit to inadequacy in the role. Medical problems weren't openly discussed either. Nor were serious school

problems open for discussion. I remember early in my principalship approaching a fellow principal and asking how she might have dealt with a serious discipline issue I was experiencing in my school. Her reply? 'I can't help you. I never have those problems.' I found that hard to believe at the time, and still do!

In my first year as a principal of a boarding school I managed a range of tough situations, including poor academic results, a boarder who ran away, another boarder who was badly injured, physical threats to a teacher by a parent, parents taking concerns about our curriculum to the media, student rebellion regarding a uniform change and a teacher with a serious psychological illness. In the ensuing 30 years there were more challenges, but some fellow principals had it tougher – school tragedies, frontpage coverage of their personal life in the local paper – the types of incidents that may be all too familiar to many principals today.

There was one major difference in the '70s: we didn't have the support that's now available. In my first year as principal, I wrote my first timetable, introduced myself to the school and local communities, went in search of new enrolments to help the school survive, struggled to understand financial balance sheets, learned about boilers for heating and met the school's milking herd – and an aggressive bull. At the same time I was trying to change the curriculum, pedagogy and culture of both the day and boarding schools.

Visit many schools today and you'll find a range of relatively new professionals, includ-

ing specialist directors of finance, public relations, human resources, professional development and fundraising. There are also special educational resource people, consultants and mentors to assist our principals.

I'm not suggesting that principals in the '70s had a more difficult job than do current principals. Today there are significantly more demands on principals regarding parental and social expectations, and a variety of legislated and regulated accountability and reporting measures.

Our young people deserve the best education that we can provide, and so long as schools remain the primary way in which we seek to educate our young people, they need to be healthy places of learning and community. For this to be achieved we need good staff, including effective principals who are excited by the challenge of the job and coping with its complexity and demands. In turn these principals, and their staff, need to feel supported.

The good news is that today's principals, and their associations, recognise problems and provide support and networks. The bad news, when you consider the size of our schools in business terms like the number of staff and annual turnover, is that we pay principals so little and make any payment the subject of some public fight. They need all the support they can get, better remuneration and respect. **1**

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### LINKS:

The Best Job in the World is available at <http://aspa.asn.au/images/surveys/2007schoolleaderssurveyreportnov.pdf>