# PRINCIPAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

# STRATEGY 2018-2021

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# OUR COLLECTIVE COMMITMENT

Dear School Principals

We are thrilled to announce the Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018 – 2021 (the Strategy).

Schools thrive when principals thrive. A great education starts with confident, committed and passionate leaders. The wellbeing of our school leaders is central to creating a positive school culture for teaching and learning. We are all committed to supporting our principals to be their best, so that they can bring out the best in our teachers, support staff and young people.

The Victorian Government has invested over $5 million in the key initiatives that form part of this Strategy. It has been co-designed with the profession, for the profession. We have all worked together to create a team around the principal – central and regional employees, principals and your peak associations and unions – to develop this Strategy and its key initiatives. It represents our collective commitment to strengthening the health and wellbeing of school principals in a systematic and sustainable way.

The Strategy was developed following a comprehensive needs analysis of the health and wellbeing challenges faced by principals and a review of leading practice research. We have listened to your valuable feedback and designed an integrated framework of initiatives and practical resources that reflect contemporary research and respond to the specific needs of the profession. The Strategy places principals at the centre of these practical initiatives and aims to provide more direct support for them.

This Strategy recognises the technical and leadership skills of principals. It acknowledges that leading and managing a school is complex and comes with many challenges and multiple demands that can, and sometimes do, impact on your health and wellbeing. This Strategy includes actions aimed at reducing the stigma around mental health.

Leading a school of committed educators to help young people learn and thrive is a great privilege, with the opportunity to fundamentally change lives for the better every day. Roles with these rewards carry large responsibility, many challenges and can be stressful. The Strategy recognises these challenges and provides supports to help principals flourish in the role. This includes providing you with a choice of specialist supports and services that can be tailored to your individual needs and different school contexts. It builds on your individual skills and capabilities to proactively promote and lead positive wellbeing within yourself and your school communities. It is designed to embed a responsive service culture to ensure that principals have confidence in our services and increasingly utilise these services in a proactive way.

The Strategy builds upon the work commenced by the new School Delivery Unit. The establishment of the unit acknowledges the workload pressures experienced by principals and represents a significant cultural shift. The Unit aims to streamline and better coordinate communications and requests to schools to ensure that schools are provided with the right information, at the right time, and with the right support.

Our collective vision is to have safe, healthy and resilient school leaders leading positive school climates, supported by strong collaborative partnerships with peers, regional and central colleagues and management.

We have included in this Strategy key information about each of the new initiatives.

**Your health and wellbeing matters.**

**Let’s continue to work together to improve the health and wellbeing of Victorian Government school principals.**

Signed by the Secretary

# PRINCIPAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY 2018 – 2021

## VISION

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy (the Strategy) aims to protect, promote and address mental and physical health and wellbeing outcomes for principals across Victoria. Our vision is to have safe, healthy, resilient and connected school leaders who are supported by strong collaborative partnerships with peers, areas, regions and central colleagues. Principals are pivotal to schools achieving excellence in teaching and learning. Their health and wellbeing is vital to them being effective wellbeing leaders within their school.

## SCHOOLS THRIVE WHEN PRINCIPALS THRIVE

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy aligns with the Whole of Victorian Government (WoVG) Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter (the Charter) that was launched by the Department in March 2017. The Charter demonstrates a strong commitment across government to improve health and wellbeing of the public sector at all levels.

The WoVG Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter approach:

* **PROTECTING** health and wellbeing by identifying potential risks and implementing practical strategies to mitigate these risks.
* **PROMOTING** health and wellbeing by building awareness, capability and confidence amongst employees to empower and assist them to manage their own wellbeing as well as promote the wellbeing of others.
* **ADDRESSING** potential health and wellbeing challenges through the provision of timely and professional support services.

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy translates this Charter to meet the wellbeing needs and priorities of our school principals. The Strategy seeks to take into account the realities of a principal’s role and ensures support mechanisms to suit their unique circumstances.

The purpose of this Strategy is to provide a clear roadmap to help the Department achieve this vision. The Department, made up of principals, regional and central office colleagues, commits to this roadmap to achieve our vision. It represents our shared commitment to improving principal health and wellbeing. The Department has committed over $5 million in funding to help implement this Strategy.

### Co-designed with the Profession for the Profession

This Strategy has been co-designed with the profession, for the profession. It is the result of consultations with over 3000 school leaders across the principal class and each of the peak associations and unions. The Department has listened to the lived experience of principals, and learned from conversations about what can improve their health and wellbeing (Appendix A). We have also incorporated inputs from experts and research into leading practice to ensure a strong evidence-base for this Strategy (Appendix B). The key initiatives that make up this Strategy reflect a balance between building on contemporary thinking and standards around health and wellbeing and responding to the specific needs of the profession.

## WHY FOCUS ON PRINCIPAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING?

### Growing Focus on Wellbeing at Work

The World Health Organisation defines mental health or wellbeing as **‘a state in which every individual** **realises his/her potential, can cope with normal** **stressors of life, can work productively and fruitfully** **and is able to make a contribution to his/her** **community’[[1]](#footnote-1).** The growing incidence of mental health issues within the population affects individuals, organisations and communities alike and poses a significant financial and social burden. Promotion of health and wellbeing requires a collaborative approach and there is a growing recognition of the role that workplaces can play in elevating wellbeing within the community. Building heathy workplaces not only helps protect individuals from health and wellbeing risks, but also helps them to flourish and operate at their best.

The Department is committed to creating a healthy and thriving culture that helps support the wellbeing of our school principals in a potentially volatile and ever-changing work environment.

### School Leadership: A Rewarding and Demanding Role

As school leaders, principals have complex and demanding leadership roles. They are not only educational leaders; they also play the role of being workplace managers, looking after the day-to-day operational aspects of running a safe and effective school environment. In many instances, principals are also regarded as leaders within the local community. Principals often have a unique blend of technical and leadership skills, resilience and resourcefulness that help them navigate this complex environment. Most principals find their roles extremely rewarding and as a profession register higher levels of job satisfaction than the general population[[2]](#footnote-2).



Figure 1: Key Stressors in a Principal’s Role (adapted from the ‘Transactional Model of Stress’)[[3]](#footnote-3)

Principals must manage multiple demands from within the school, the broader community and the central and regional offices, often spanning multiple legal requirements, as well as government policy and program commitments. Principals also have to attend to the pressures of life outside of work such as family commitments, financial obligations, personal matters and health issues. These ongoing challenges can have a cumulative impact on the health and wellbeing of principals.

The Strategy will help ensure that we are embedding a combination of proactive and responsive initiatives to help principals thrive in their roles. It builds on the inherent strengths that principals bring to their role and supports them with targeted initiatives that are available when they need it the most.

**The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey[[4]](#footnote-4) found that nationally, when compared to the general population, principals experienced higher levels of**:

* Job demands (1.5 times higher)
* Emotional demands (1.7 times higher)
* Emotional labour demands (1.7 times higher)
* Burnout (1.6 times higher)
* Stress symptoms (1.7 times higher)
* Difficulty sleeping (2.2 times higher)
* Cognitive stress (1.5 times higher)
* Somatic symptoms (1.3 times higher)
* Depressive symptoms (1.3 times higher)
* 2.9% reported thoughts of self-harm, often or all of the time.

### Achieving Excellence in Teaching and Learning Outcomes

School excellence relies on our principals being healthy and safe. Their wellbeing contributes to a positive school culture that maximises teaching and learning outcomes[[5]](#footnote-5).

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy will assist with the achievement of two key elements of the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) — a positive climate for learning and professional leadership.

The Strategy also aligns with the *Developing self and others* professional practice requirements outlinedin the Australian Professional Standard for Principalsand recognises principal health and wellbeing as afundamental enabler for success.



Figure 2: Alignment with FISO Outcomes

# TEAM AROUND THE PRINCIPAL: AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK

The Strategy defines for the first time an integrated framework of supports that can work cohesively to promote and sustain the health and wellbeing of our school leaders. It maps the existing system, fills gaps, and encourages everyone who works with principals to consider health and wellbeing in everything they do. This approach ensures an effective team around the principal to support their health and wellbeing.

## WHY INTEGRATED?

The term ***‘integrated’*** refers to a systematic approach where different supports work cohesively together to provide a joined-up service framework. An integrated approach to workplace health and wellbeing combines the strengths of health promotion, OHS and human resources to optimise both the promotion of health and prevention and management of health problems in the workplace[[6]](#footnote-6).

* There is a growing recognition that wellbeing and health promotion activities within organisations require a more holistic and integrated approach to have sustainable impacts
* The central and regional offices currently offer a range of services to help support the health and wellbeing of principals
* However, the consultations to date highlight the need for more improvements in how these supports work and provide more information to build awareness of these services and ways to access them
* The development of the Strategy identified potential gaps and opportunities to ensure a more integrated and holistic support framework.

Integration is no small aim for our large system, but it is critical for the delivery of better wellbeing outcomes for school principals, and helps them in turn to become better wellbeing leaders for their respective school communities. As such, it is a framework we aspire to achieve together over time.

## KEY FEATURES OF THE INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK

* Demonstrates the need for shared leadership across the Department towards delivering more integrated, joined-up services to enhance principal health and wellbeing
* Provides access to multiple support options that offer a combination of practical, operational supports along with physical, psychological and social supports
* Builds on the existing organisational service structure to reinforce the range of supports available to principals
* Underpinned by key initiatives that address the gaps identified across the current suite of services
* Recognises the need to support principals in becoming effective wellbeing leaders in their own schools.

## BENEFITS OF THE INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK

This Integrated Framework has been designed to create a wrap-around system of supports for principals to help them flourish in their role as school leaders. Some of benefits to principals include:

* **Addressing key sources of stress** (e.g. workload and managing complex matters) through practical and operational support
* **Offering principals the flexibility to choose** from multiple support pathways (both internal and external) depending on what best suits their present needs
* **Providing access to specialist supports and services** to meet individual wellbeing needsand challenges
* **Embedding a culture of support** across the Department
* **Promoting individual skill and capability** to enhance their own wellbeing
* **Equipping principals with the tools and confidence** to be effective wellbeing leaders for their teachers,students and the broader school community.



Figure 3: The Team around the Principal

\*Accessing additional wellbeing supports offered through professional associations and unions are optional

## WORKING TOGETHER TO DELIVER A FRAMEWORK OF INTEGRATED SUPPORTS

The Integrated Framework recognises that different functions and roles across the Department need to play a role in supporting and enhancing the health and wellbeing of our principals. **It represents our** **collective aspiration and acknowledges gaps in the** **current system to deliver a well-rounded system** **of supports.**

### Regional Services

Regional Services aim to provide **operational services that support schools at the local level. Local supports can have the greatest immediate impact on principal health and wellbeing.** They are frequently the firstpoint of call for many of the day-to-day challengesthat principals face. Regional leaders provide criticalline management support to principals throughadvice, guidance and coaching. Similarly, dedicatedregional staff can help principals activate a rangeof locally available services through Learning Placesand Communities of Practice, including advice onmanaging student behaviours, teaching and learning,occupational health and safety (OHS), and otheroperational challenges faced by principals. Regionalservices also have a team of specialists who can helpsupport principals with emergency response, safetyand security issues within schools.

*“Just knowing that I had the backing of my SEIL in dealing with this complex issue made my stress levels go down. It made me feel like we were working on this together – it wasn’t all up to me. This hasn’t always been my experience in the past.”*

**QUESTION: When facing a difficult technical or legal issue, do you know who to contact in Regional or Central services for support?**

The Department is currently developing the Principals Page + which will help clarify who you can contact for what purposes. Our aim is to ensure you can access the relevant supports simply and in a timely way.

### Central Services

Central Services aim to provide principals access to **in-house technical specialists who provide advice,** **systems and policies to guide schools in their** **operations. This can impact the health, safety and** **wellbeing of all employees (including principals).**

The role of Central Services can range from providing expert technical advice and guidance, identifying systemic challenges and issues, developing and implementing effective organisational systems and policies to managing service delivery standards through contractors. Central Services include the Principal Support Unit, the Legal Division, OHS, Payroll, Recruitment, Workers’ Compensation, media and communications and Employee Conduct Branch, to name a few.

*“The practical advice from the Legal Division makes me feel supported through difficult times. In my experience, they have always been highly responsive, empathetic and helpful in navigating some of the issues that I’ve had to manage.”*

**QUESTION: Are the number of direct reports you have adversely affecting your wellbeing?**

Evidence shows that having too many direct reports can significantly increase the supervisory load for leaders and result in ineffective delegation of authority and increased workload[[7]](#footnote-7). A study conducted on a sample of principals in 2017 shows that over 75% of them had over 12 direct reports[[8]](#footnote-8).

The Department’s [Organisation Design Guide](https://edugate.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edrms/collaboration/RSGAdmin/NWVR%20Schools%20Newsletter%20Library/Organisation%20Design%20Guide%20For%20Vic%20School%20Leaders.pdf#search=organisational%20design%20guide) offers practical steps to help you practice distributed leadership. It can help you identify your optimal number of direct reports to reduce the workload associated with supervising too many staff. This is particularly relevant for larger schools.

### Learning and Development

Learning and Development aims to **provide proactive strategies that help build skills and confidence of principals to better manage health and wellbeing – their own and that of others. Building capability amongst principals can help them be effective at leading positive school climates.** Learning and development supportsempower principals with the necessary skills, toolsand resources through access to professionallearning. They help principals better manage theirown wellbeing and that of others and recognise whento seek additional support. While a majority of theseare currently made available through the BastowInstitute, several other areas of the Departmentprovide opportunities for specialist training andprofessional development sessions as part ofmaintaining professional practice standards.

*“The Evolve program was just what I needed when I started out in my role as a principal. The transition can be quite daunting because of the sheer breadth of responsibilities. The Evolve program offered practical technical skills that I could draw on and having access*

*to an expert coach was invaluable.”*

### Professional Supports

Professional Supports aim to provide **external, expert supports that have been engaged by the Department to help support the health, safety and wellbeing of all staff (including principals).** These services can beaccessed on demand. The Department recognisesthat on some occasions, principals may benefitfrom and prefer accessing advice and supportfrom experts external to the Department to seek adifferent and independent perspective. A number ofthese services are confidential and free for principalsto access. Principals can seek support on personalhealth and wellbeing issues, advice and coachingon managing complex staff issues, and health andsafety, amongst other services.

*“When it comes to my own health and wellbeing, it’s easier talking about it with someone external to the Department. There’s still a lot of stigma attached around raising health and wellbeing issues – I don’t want to be seen as ‘not coping’. Having experienced, independent experts to debrief was very helpful.”*

**QUESTION: Do you ever debrief with a trained professional for your mental health and wellbeing?**

Principals as a profession are not required to undertake professional supervision – a good practice framework widely utilised across Allied Health professions. Yet the research suggests that the uniqueness of the principal role and their high exposure to challenging interactions makes them well suited to benefit from professional supervision with a trained professional to help maintain their health and wellbeing.

### Professional Networks, Peak Associations and Unions

Peer networks provide **critical social capital that is essential for sustaining wellbeing in a principal role**.Social capital refers to the benefits of social networksthat build solidarity and mutual goodwill andreciprocity by linking a group of individuals together[[9]](#footnote-9).The Department actively encourages principals toparticipate in formal and informal peer networks tohelp principals feel connected and reduce potentialfeelings of isolation. Peer networks often helpidentify and escalate shared issues that require amore systemic solution. They encourage sharing ofinnovative strategies and help create economies ofscale. In addition, these networks also provide animportant source of peer support and consultationthat can help complement other systemic supports.Peak associations and unions offer their memberswellbeing supports through professional learningforums and one-on-one advice, should principalschoose to join.

*“It is always helpful to know that you are not alone in your journey as a principal. It can be an isolating one unless you build your peer networks. Your peers can sometimes be your biggest source of support. They know what you’re going through. Making a quick call or*

*meeting over a coffee can make a difference.”*

### Principals

Finally, in order for the Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy to be effective, **principals themselves are** **encouraged to play an active role**. Health and wellbeing often requires a personal commitment on the part of the individual. Like any sustainable behaviour change, it requires the development and maintenance of personal wellbeing habits and strategies. Principals are encouraged to proactively engage with the range of strategies on offer through the Department and identify ones that work best for them. Their active involvement and feedback will help ensure that the services put in place are effective in meeting their needs and adopt a continuous improvement approach.

*As principals, you often put yourself last. You’re always prioritising the wellbeing of your students and your staff over your own. You want to instil confidence in others by not letting anything get to you. But if you are not looking after yourself or getting support when you need it – you’re not going to be of much assistance to those you lead.”*

**QUESTION: Have you asked someone to check-in regularly with you on your health and wellbeing?**

Individuals are often the last to realise that they are not feeling their best. Consider having a ‘critical friend’ who can check in with you on a regular basis. This can be a family member, a peer in another school, or someone in your leadership team. Make sure they know the referral pathways for support so they can prompt you to seek timely assistance to sustain your health and wellbeing.

## BUILDING ON EXISTING INITIATIVES AND SUPPORTS FOR PRINCIPALS

The Department already has a number of existing initiatives that support principal health and wellbeing.

### Principal Support Unit (PSU)

#### Expert advice and support on curly HR and workforce matters

The PSU consists of former principals and expert VPS staff providing principals with confidential and specialist advice and support. The PSU conducts school visits and ongoing phone/email consultations with principals (as well as with regional, professional association and union personnel seeking input to their support for principals). The PSU also runs workshops for principals and prospective principals addressing a range of topics which are drivers of many of the ‘wellbeing issues’ arising for school leaders such as people management, human resource issues, decision making, managing consultative processes, workforce planning and building leadership within their schools.

### School Delivery Unit (SDU)

#### Starting the cultural shift on how the Department communicates with schools

The SDU was established in January 2018 in response to feedback from schools and peak bodies that principals receive too much information and too many requests, from too many central office and regional channels. This was seen as having a significant impact on principal health and wellbeing. The SDU helps coordinate information and requests sent to schools and ensures that principals are provided with the right information, at the right time, and with the right support.

### Principal Health and Wellbeing: Mindsets for Effective Change

#### Building capability to help principals manage stress and thrive in their roles

The Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership (Bastow) offers a practical two-and-a-half-day workshop which is designed to help the principal-class better understand the impact of their role on their health and wellbeing and reduce stress by developing an individualised health and wellbeing plan. This workshop does not simply present a range of standard resilience or coping strategies, but rather seeks to engage deeply with the individual’s situation and motivating beliefs to explore immediate alternative strategies.

### Learning Places

#### Mobilising expert support in the regions to assist schools

Learning Places embeds multi-disciplinary teams and approaches in each of the 17 Areas to provide schools, students and their families with more local access to a range of experts – from executive leaders to curriculum and assessment expertise, and a dedicated health and wellbeing workforce. These teams work together to ensure that a holistic, focused and complementary set of skills and resources are available to those most in need.

### Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and Manager Assist

#### Confidential and free access to expert support for personal and workplace wellbeing challenges

EAP is a short-term, effective and strictly confidential counselling service that is available 24/7 for up to four sessions for the Department’s employees to discuss any personal or work-related issues. Similarly, the Manager Assist is a telephone advisory service supporting principals and managers to access management support and coaching. Both services are free to use and can be accessed by calling 1300 361 008.

### Local Administrative Bureau (LAB) Model

#### Creating economies of scale – administrative support for smaller schools

LAB provides cost effective and high quality administration support for small Victorian schools on an opt-in, fee-for-service basis. Its aim is to reduce the impact of red tape and the day-to-day administrative burden on principals and business managers so they have more time to focus on learning and teaching outcomes, strategic planning and management of their resources. Staff at the LAB are trained and kept up to date in best-practice administration for Department policies and systems. Their services include administration support in the areas of finance, budget, payroll, administration and the Student Resource Package (SRP).

# FROM IDEAS TO ACTIONS: SEVEN NEW KEY INITIATIVES

To learn more about each of these initiatives, please visit the Principals Page +

## KEY INITIATIVES 2018-2019

### PROACTIVE INITIATIVES

#### School Policy Templates Portal

**What is it?**

* Suite of relevant policy templates
* Meets legal, Departmental policy, and school registration requirements
* Easily adapted for each school

**How will it benefit principals?**

* Reduces workload by providing resources to support compliance
* Provides practical guidelines for policy implementation

**Service type**

Central Services

#### Principal Mentor Program

**What is it?**

* On demand access to experienced principal mentors
* Mentors trained in psychological first aid
* Up to 12 hours of mentoring on offer

**How will it benefit principals?**

* Reduces feelings of isolation
* Connects principals to experienced peers
* Provides operational and psychological support

**Service type**

Learning and Development

#### Regional Capability Development

**What is it?**

* Capability development sessions for regional leaders and staff
* Skills and resources to better support principals’ health and wellbeing

**How will it benefit principals?**

* Provides a culture of care and support through regular engagement on health and wellbeing
* Promotes awareness of supports available

**Service type**

Regional Services

#### Proactive Wellbeing Supervision

**What is it?**

* Allied health model bi-annual debriefing sessions with an experienced psychologist (being piloted in two networks)
* Proactive check-in for new and acting principals at 6-8 week mark

**How will it benefit principals?**

* Proactive debrief opportunities with an independent provider
* Development of a personalised wellbeing plan and strategies

**Service type**

Professional Supports

#### Principal Health Checks

**What is it?**

* Access to physical and mental health check services
* Detailed health assessment report
* Independent provider
* Confidential and voluntary

**How will it benefit principals?**

* Provides expert practical health and lifestyle advice based on assessment
* Access referrals to specialist services as needed

**Service type**

Professional Supports

### RESPONSIVE INITIATIVES

#### Complex Matter Support Team

**What is it?**

* A Lead Professional will coordinate and connect principals with supports from a number of areas
* Assist with responding to correspondence from parents and advocates

**How will it benefit principals?**

* Reduces principals’ workload in managing complex cases
* Provides expert guidance and support to ensure better outcomes

**Service type**

Regional Services

#### Early Intervention Program

**What is it?**

* Early intervention for principals requiring support through self referrals
* Access to up to 12 mental health and 4 physical support sessions

**How will it benefit principals?**

* Provides support before health issues escalate
* Enables principals to choose a provider of their choice for ongoing support

**Service type**

Professional Supports

## SEVEN NEW INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT THE PRINCIPAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY FRAMEWORK

The Department has committed over $5 million to help implement pilot strategies to address the potential gaps identified through the Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy Discussion Paper. This funding builds upon existing Department initiatives and paves the way for the introduction of seven new pilot initiatives to support principal health and wellbeing in 2018.

The seven pilot initiatives aim to:

* Address the key gaps identified through our consultations with the profession to date (Appendix A)
* Draw on leading practice frameworks in promoting mental health and wellbeing (Appendix B)
* Offer principals a combination of proactive and responsive services
* Provide more services where the Department actively works with principals to support their health and wellbeing, rather than simply providing access to more self-help strategies
* Target operational, physical, psychological and social wellbeing resources to help support principal health and wellbeing
* Establish a principal-centric service delivery model where each initiative integrates seamlessly with the others, ensuring more cross-referrals.

The feedback and evaluation outcomes for these pilot initiatives will help inform longer-term strategies for enhancing principal health and wellbeing.

## LISTENING, LEARNING AND RESPONDING TO PRINCIPALS’ NEEDS

### School Policy Templates Portal

#### What we heard

* Developing school-level policies is an essential but time-consuming part of a principal’s role
* Having to balance multiple policy requirements ranging from various legislations, Departmental polices and school registration requirements made the task of drafting school level policies extremely complex and added considerably to principals’ administrative workload
* Principals told us that they would like more support from the Department to help meet their policy compliance requirements.

#### Our response

The Department is providing principals and schools with a suite of policy templates that are written in plain English, are all located in the same place (the portal) and meet legal, Departmental policy and school review and registration requirements. Principals can tailor the templates to meet their school’s particular needs. Research indicates that workload is a critical job demand that impacts on employee wellbeing as it requires sustained physical and psychological effort. Job demands may result in physical and mental health problems such as burnout if workload transforms into chronic overload[[10]](#footnote-10).

The School Policy Templates Portal is a proactive operational initiative that will streamline the process of developing and implementing school-level policies and reduce principal workload.

### Principal Mentor Program

#### What we heard

* Principalship is an exciting, unique and challenging role. It requires knowledge and know-how in an almost unprecedented range of disciplines, from pedagogy and data analysis to literacy, procurement and counselling
* The role can also be an isolating one and several principals have suggested that having access to an experienced mentor, who has been in their shoes, would enhance some aspects of their role
* Most principals are aware of the benefits of mentoring and actively mentor others, but few have mentors themselves.

#### Our response

The Principal Mentor Program is a proactive initiative offered through Bastow that will link principals (including acting principals) with a trained mentor who is an experienced and highly skilled recently retired principal. Mentors will partner with their mentees to share their expertise—as a sounding board and trusted advisor. Mentors will be supported to recognise emerging health and wellbeing issues and respond to them appropriately.

There are a number of well-established benefits to mentoring, including improved self-confidence, greater personal satisfaction and growth, an increased availability of advice and relevant information, encouraged reflection on practice, additional personal support, and reduced isolation[[11]](#footnote-11). Higher levels of health and wellbeing has also been noted as an outcome of mentoring amongst school leaders[[12]](#footnote-12). The Principal Mentor Program will offer timely support from a trusted peer who has a unique understanding of the challenges and rewards that come with this remarkable role.

### Regional Capability Development

#### What we heard

For most principals, the culture of support stems from the perceived support they experience from the regional leadership teams and support functions they interact with on a regular basis (e.g. SEILs, AEDs, RDs, CLOs, OHS Support Officers, etc.)

Principals reported that the nature and extent of support received from regional leaders and staff varied considerably across individuals

Principals also indicated that dual responsibilities of regional leaders to support principals and monitor performance made them reluctant to raise wellbeing issues with their leaders.

#### Our response

The Regional Capability Development initiative aims to develop the skills, capabilities and confidence of regional leaders and staff so that they can contribute to a culture of care and support for principals. A genuine culture of care and support can significantly buffer the impact of the day-to- day challenges that principals experience. There is significant evidence to show that building a supportive culture at work can help minimise the stigma associated with raising mental health issues and encourage individuals to seek help early[[13]](#footnote-13). A growing body of evidence shows that positive leadership approaches that help build psychological capital can help promote wellbeing amongst employees[[14]](#footnote-14).

Through a series of capability development workshops, this pilot program will establish a shared understanding and language for discussing wellbeing at work and equip regional staff with practical tools and resources to help principals access the supports that they need.

### Proactive Wellbeing Supervision

#### What we heard

* The principal role can be a challenging role that may place significant demands on their own wellbeing
* Principals reported that they would benefit from more proactive access to psychological support services from someone familiar with their role context
* They identified a preference to debrief with an independent expert practitioner on personal and professional aspects of their role that impact on their wellbeing
* New and acting principals reported feeling overwhelmed 6-8 weeks into their role.

#### Our response

The Proactive Wellbeing Supervision pilot is a proactive initiative aimed at offering principals (including acting principals) access to bi-annual wellbeing supervision sessions with an experienced psychologist. Supervision is a well-recognised good practice framework that enables wellbeing across a number of professions[[15]](#footnote-15). It has been adopted as a professional requirement across allied health services, in recognition of the high psychological demands placed on allied health professionals. A wellbeing supervisor can help employees use their resources effectively, manage their workload, mitigate the effects of stress and potential burnout and optimise motivation and morale[[16]](#footnote-16).

The Proactive Wellbeing Supervision pilot will allow principals to debrief and acknowledge potential impacts of their work on their own health, wellbeing and performance (both in and outside of work). This pilot program will also offer a proactive outreach initiative through which an experienced psychologist will contact all new and acting principals, six to eight weeks after commencing in their roles. These sessions will serve as opportunities for principals to engage in reflective practice and adopt preventative strategies to help them thrive and succeed in their roles.

### Principal Health Checks

#### What we heard

* The Australian Principal Health and Wellbeing survey highlights that many health and wellbeing ratings are lower than that of the population average
* In state-wide consultations principals reflected on the impact of aspects of their job on their health and wellbeing
* Having access to professional health and wellbeing supports and advice was identified by principals as important in supporting them to maintain their health and wellbeing
* Principals wanted the option of seeking health consultations that were discrete and confidential in nature.

#### Our response

Principal Health Checks is a new dedicated proactive service, which provides principals with free, confidential health checks. These health checks are voluntary and include a comprehensive assessment covering pathology, lifestyle, medical examination and mental health. Given the confidentiality of the service, the Department will only receive de-identified, aggregated data on the uptake of the service and a summary of emerging health and wellbeing trends. The Principal Health Checks is just one way the Department continues to develop, implement and promote initiatives specific to Principal wellbeing. It will supplement existing confidential support currently available to individual principal-class members, including the Employee Assistance Program.

A preventive approach to health incorporates the prevention of illness, injury and disease, rehabilitation of chronic illness and the reduction in the burden of illness in a community. Initiatives such as the Principal Health Checks have been identified as a key preventative mechanism that can assist with the early detection and prompt intervention to treat any health concerns[[17]](#footnote-17).

**QUESTION: Are you having difficulties with sleep? The Principal Health Checks can help.**

Research shows that a lack of adequate and quality support can have a negative impact on mood, concentration and lead to reduced feelings of wellbeing[[18]](#footnote-18). The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey found that 54% of principals suffer from poor quality sleep[[19]](#footnote-19). The Principal Health Checks offer proactive call backs to help principals better manage their sleep difficulties as part of the advice and consultations offered through this service.

### Complex Matter Support Team

#### What we heard

* Responding to complex matters involving students or complaints from parents and advocates can take significant time, and may require principals to seek input and advice from a number of areas across the Department
* Management of complex matters can add significantly to a principal’s workload
* Principals reported feeling quite overwhelmed when having to take on the management of a complex matter in addition to their day-to-day school management responsibilities.

#### Our response

There are growing incidences of complex situations that school principals face which create additional work demands for them[[20]](#footnote-20). As research has consistently linked high work demands to negative health and wellbeing outcomes[[21]](#footnote-21), the Complex Matter Support Teams aims to reduce the additional workload that principals experience when managing complex situations by directly supporting principals who are dealing with complex cases.

Under this initiative, a Lead Professional from the Team will be the principal’s single point of contact in central office, to coordinate and connect them with supports from the Region and various program areas across the Department. The Lead Professional will also reduce the principal’s workload by preparing responses to complex and frequent correspondence from parents and advocates on the principal’s behalf.

This initiative will reduce the workload and stress of principals when responding to complex matters. The Complex Matter Support Team is also a part of the recently announced Protective Schools Initiative that ensures better support for principals to manage instances of violence in schools.

### Early Intervention Program

#### What we heard

* The Department offers a wide range of services to help respond to health and wellbeing challenges amongst principals, however many of these services were not being accessed early enough to prevent a health and wellbeing issue from escalating
* Potential and actual health and wellbeing risks left unattended can result in the development of physical and psychological injuries that may have long term, debilitating impacts on principals
* A number of Departmental teams supporting principals also identified a need to have a referral mechanism through which principals who were struggling could access physical or psychological health supports.

#### Our response

The Early Intervention Program is a responsive initiative that aims to support principals to manage early onset health and wellbeing risk indicators and prevent them from escalating i.e injury management. This will enable the Department to encourage principals to self-refer and seek timely professional support for their health and wellbeing from a qualified health provider of their choice through this pilot. The pilot will help mobilise appropriate professional supports, referral mechanisms, resources and tools for principals that can assist with the restoration of their health and wellbeing for work and non-work related matters.

There is significant evidence to show that an effective early intervention approach can help prevent psychosocial injuries that are difficult to remediate when addressed at a later stage[[22]](#footnote-22). A robust early intervention program relies on early identification of risk factors and a multi-pronged approach to prevent escalation of health issues.

# FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy presents a significant cultural transition for the Department and how we support the health and wellbeing of our principals. The seven new key initiatives outlined in this document are the starting point for this journey. The Department is committed to exploring a number of additional activities to help ensure that we are continually embedding health and wellbeing into our existing organisational systems and cultural practices.

Some of the additional activities that are being undertaken and considered include:

* **Mental health and wellbeing capability development** sessions are in development as partof implementing the WoVG Mental Health andWellbeing Charter. The focus of these sessions willbe to raise awareness about mental health withinthe workplace and introduce foundational skillsfor understanding wellbeing and enhancing thecapacity to manage stress and build resilience bydrawing on well-validated strategies (includingcognitive behavioural techniques, strengthsbased approaches and emotional intelligence). School teachers, staff and principals will haveaccess to tailored sessions to help broaden andbuild their social and psychological capacityrequired to flourish – both in and outside theworkplace. It is envisaged that this initiativewill help principals build their own capability toenhance their wellbeing and adopt a whole ofschool approach to leading wellbeing in others.
* **Set up an interactive Principals Page +** (Appendix C) that provides easy access tosupports currently available to principals alongwith up-to-date contact details for accessingthese supports. This revamped, interactive site willprovide a combination of practical, operationalsupports as well as the full suite of health andwellbeing resources and tools that principals canuse to enhance their own health and wellbeingand that of others. The Principals Page + will alsobe utilised to collect ongoing feedback to improvethese services.
* **Implementing a Protective Schools Initiative** that will offer principals better operational advice and support following the reporting of school incidents that impact school operations or the health and wellbeing of students. Principals and staff making reports will get immediate expert advice on how to respond to any incidents and receive fast-tracked access to social workers, behavioural experts and psychologists. The initiative will also be looking at enhanced data analysis to identify trends and initiate preventative actions, build capability across support staff to help manage students with challenging behaviours, and embed effective case management for complex student matters. A Protective Schools Taskforce, comprising educators, psychologists and child health experts has formed and will help guide the implementation of initiatives that will prevent and mitigate violence and aggressive behaviours in schools.
* **Enhanced principal readiness** by assisting aspirant principals to understand their leadership skills and capabilities prior to taking on their first principal role. This model will provide them with opportunities to receive feedback on their current leadership capabilities against the Australian Professional Standards for Principals, including Developing Self and Others. Feedback from the model will provide insights into further professional learning to be well prepared for principalship in a Victorian Government school.
* **Developing a principal health and wellbeing welcome pack** to ensure that new principals aremade aware of the health and wellbeing supportsavailable to them at the outset. This pack willlook at connecting new principals to differentsupport functions – both regional and central –and promoting a culture of care. The program willintegrate the New Starter Debriefs and PrincipalMentor Program, both of which are designedto support new principals transitioning into therole. The welcome pack will complement andexist alongside the Evolve program and regionalinduction processes.
* **Improved messaging for the expectations of school parents and communities** is currently beingconsidered. This messaging will help clarify keymessages to the parent and school community tomanage their expectations around appropriateconduct and accepted behaviours. It is anticipatedthat this initiative will provide clearer guidance forparents to help ensure that their interactions withthe school remain constructive and respectful atall times.
* **OHS Strategic Review** is currently underway to examine how principals and schools can be better supported to manage the safety of their immediate environment including psychological and physical safety. The scope of the review includes assessing service design and operating models, and the effectiveness of the OHS Management System.
* **Applied research into job design** will further examine the workload of principals and optimal organisational design for Victorian Government schools, building on the significant research to date[[23]](#footnote-23). Job design requires careful assessment and alignment between the nature of the work, the systems of work that are in place, the physical environment and the person-job fit. Job design has been well recognised as a way of enhancing health and wellbeing and improving productivity amongst staff. It is anticipated that this research will help inform future practices that can help streamline the workload of schools and principals in a sustainable way, while also delivering more effective school outcomes.
* **Supporting the transition of experienced principals seeking retirement** by offeringopportunities to apply for coaching and mentoringroles. This initiative will help ensure that we valuetheir experience and provide career transitionchannels that allow them to share their yearsof practical knowledge. This is already beingput into practice through the Principal MentorProgram. Expressions of interest are being soughtfrom recently retired principals to be a part of atrained and capable panel of mentors who will bemanaged by Bastow.

# EVALUATION

## WHY EVALUATE?

The purpose of evaluation is to make a commitment to the profession for successful project management, continuous improvement, and to report on progress relating to the Strategy and pilot initiatives. The Strategy evaluation framework will assess the reach of the initiatives at regular intervals during the implementation phase, as well as measure the effectiveness of the Strategy and the initiatives in building principals’ sense of wellbeing in their role.

The evaluation of the Strategy aims to:

* Address whether fit-for-purpose targeted interventions are being delivered
* Address whether the investment in the Strategy is resulting in the desired impact
* Increase accountability and visibility for achieving results
* Make recommendations for future improvement.

## WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

### What does successful implementation involve?

The Strategy will be evaluated to measure whether each of the initiatives are designed and implemented as intended. It is essential that the initiatives clearly respond to needs identified through the extensive research and consultation stages of developing the Strategy. In order to achieve successful outcomes, sufficient resources will need to be allocated to each of the initiatives and monitored throughout implementation. The Department will actively communicate and promote the utilisation of the initiatives and how they can be accessed. Monitoring the utilisation rates across the implementation phase will provide early indications of success across each pilot.

Successful implementation will also require strong involvement and support from the Department’s leaders. The Department will establish regular feedback loops with principals and their representative bodies and build on their feedback to inform future stages of implementation. As the initiatives are part of an integrated framework of supports, cross-referrals between the pilot initiatives will also be a measure of implementation success. To ensure success through the various stages of implementation, the Department commits to providing six monthly progress updates based on key metrics. This will ensure that any emerging issues are identified early and addressed promptly through a continuous improvement cycle.

### How will we know we are achieving success over time?

Health and wellbeing outcomes can take longer to be realised than other strategic outcomes and can be difficult to measure as they operate in environments that are constantly changing. The Department has developed a longer-term vision to evaluate both individual and organisational measures which have been linked to health and wellbeing. At the end of the three year period we expect to see the extent to which these factors have improved to indicate an overall increase in principals’ health and wellbeing.

#### At an individual level:

The experience of service delivery over a period of time will be an indicator of the long-term success of the Strategy and its initiatives. A successfully embedded Strategy will minimise the sources of stress for principals and result in perceived improvements to health and wellbeing. An increase in job satisfaction and employee engagement are also key individual factors that will indicate the success of the Strategy in addressing principals’ health and wellbeing.

#### At an organisational level:

A successful Strategy will also have broader implications at an organisational level and the environment in which the principal operates. Positive outcomes will include a reduction in workers’ compensation claims, improvement on the rate of return to work and a decrease in unplanned absenteeism. A decrease in turnover rates and an improvement in the perceived attractiveness of a principal role will also be key indicators of the Strategy’s success.

# APPENDIX A: UNDERSTANDING PRINCIPAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING NEEDS

A robust health and wellbeing strategy for principals needs to be based on a clear understanding of the health and wellbeing challenges faced by principals within their operational context. Over the past year, the Department carried out an extensive needs analysis, consulting with a wide range of stakeholders including:

* key stakeholders, namely principals, peak principal associations and unions
* subject matter experts across the Department
* branches across the Department that directly support principals
* the entire principal class through the 2017 Term 4 Area Forums.

The review team also considered this feedback against leading practice standards by considering input and guidance from:

* a literature review of international leading practice for the mental health and wellbeing of school leaders
* academics in the areas of leadership and principal mental health
* organisational psychologists.

The findings of the review were published in the Principal Health and Wellbeing Discussion Paper that was released in August 2017. The paper captured the wellbeing challenges faced by principals and provided critical insights of the lived experience of principals. This helped identify some clear health and wellbeing needs of principals.

## EMERGING AREAS OF FOCUS FOR IMPROVING PRINCIPAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

### 1. Setting up for success

* Better preparing new and aspiring principals coming into the role
* Improving induction and orientation processes to familiarise new and acting principals with the supports and systems that are available to them – both at a central and regional level
* Connecting principals to peer networks so that they can benefit from the experience of their peers.

### 2. Proactive culture of support

* Ensuring principals have access to a range of supports (both internal and external/ professional)
* Ensuring that senior leaders within the Department (including Regions) are creating a supportive environment for principals that prioritises the wellbeing of principals
* Providing training and development opportunities to lift the capability of principals to manage their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those they lead.

### 3. Respectful and inclusive school communities

* Offering specialist supports/policy directions to enable principals to build respectful and inclusive school communities
* Supporting principals during a dispute resolution process – both functional and psychosocial support
* Providing better support to principals to ensure physical and psychological safety is prioritised.

### 4. Effective leadership and management at all levels

* Building stronger leadership teams to support principals within their schools and building better collaboration across schools
* Streamlining the way in which work is allocated to principals so that they consider existing work pressures and deadlines of principals and the life cycle of work within a school
* Minimising the administrative burden of principals by providing more templates for policies and procedures, clear guidelines and resources where possible.

These emerging areas of focus have helped inform the priority strategies and actions that will be put in place through the Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

# APPENDIX B: BUILDING ON LEADING PRACTICE

## UNDERSTANDING WELLBEING AND HEALTH PROMOTION

A holistic framework for understanding wellbeing**[[24]](#footnote-24)**

Wellbeing relates to one’s physical and psychological wellbeing as well. Contemporary research shows that wellbeing consists of two key components:

* **Emotion and energy** at any given point in time (also known as Subjective Wellbeing)[[25]](#footnote-25)
* **Meaning and purpose** in one’s life (also known as Eudaimonic Wellbeing)[[26]](#footnote-26)

Both these aspects contribute towards one’s overall levels of wellbeing.

The level of wellbeing experienced depends upon a combination of different drivers – inner life, outer life and work life. Some of these factors help enhance our wellbeing, while some of these factors detract.

* **Inner life** refers to your personality and innate preferences – how you think about life, your attitudes, motivations, emotional disposition, etc.
* **Outer life** refers to factors outside of your life at work that influence your wellbeing, including your family situation, carer responsibilities, financial pressures, health and lifestyle, hobbies and interests and level of community connection
* **Work life** refers to factors that we know impact on wellbeing, including our relationships with our supervisors, co-workers, the work environment itself, the type and volume of work, clarity in role and having the desired capability.

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy and associated initiatives help address and enhance all three drivers of wellbeing to ensure a well-balanced approach.



Figure 4: Understanding Wellbeing and Wellbeing Drivers[[27]](#footnote-27)

### Adopting leading practices to promoting health and wellbeing

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy utilises the key principles espoused in the WoVG Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter. The Charter brings together contemporary research and practices across three different domains to provide a robust framework for the promotion of health and wellbeing at work[[28]](#footnote-28). The table below shows how the key initiatives introduced through this Strategy align with leading practices across each of the three domains.

## KEY INITIATIVES 2018-2019

**Promote**

Builds on positive psychology, organisation development, management and organisational psychology practices

**Protect**

Builds on occupational health psychology, public health and occupational health and safety and risk management practices and responses

**Address**

Builds on medicine, psychiatry and psychological health and wellbeing responses

#### School Policy Templates Portal

**Promote**

* Frees up principals to focus on aspects of the role that bring meaning and purpose

**Protect**

* Minimises the source of a significant job stressor
* Reduces job demands

#### Principal Mentor Program

**Promote**

* Helps develop social capital
* Develops a growth mindset

**Protect**

* Reduces isolation as a risk factor
* Buffers against potential stressors on the job

#### Regional Capability Development

**Promote**

* Helps develop social capital
* Encourages positive leadership and cultural practices

**Protect**

* Buffers against potential stressors on the job

#### Proactive Wellbeing Supervision

**Promote**

* Adopts a strengths based approach
* Emphasis on enhancing wellbeing (not addressing issues)
* Encourages the development of effective coping mechanisms

**Protect**

* Prevents unmanaged stress from building up
* Reduces the development of vicarious trauma
* Identifies early health and wellbeing risk signs

#### Principal Health Checks

**Promote**

* Encourages and promotes healthy lifestyle practices
* Increases awareness of health issues

**Protect**

* Minimises hidden health risks
* Prevents the escalation of risks into serious illness or injury
* Enables professional health interventions

#### Complex Matter Management

**Protect**

* Minimises the source of a significant job stressor
* Reduces job demands
* Connects principals to existing Departmental resources

**Address**

* Connects principals to professional health interventions

#### Early Intervention Program

**Protect**

* Identifies early health and wellbeing risk signs
* Prevents the escalation of risks into serious illness or injury

**Address**

* Enables longer term professional health interventions

## OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy draws on some key guiding principles to help ensure its relevance to school principals, as well as aligning it with leading practice and ensuring practicality around suggested actions.

### Principal-centric services

The Strategy is principal-centric – driven by needs of the principal as the end user. A principal-centric approach requires rethinking how health and wellbeing services are delivered to principals by considering their lived experience. This approach will help ensure that the strategies put in place adopt a focus on delivering a positive experience that promotes awareness of the available services, access to relevant services, satisfaction with the services, and loyalty i.e. repeated utilisation of the service and/ or referral to others.

The principal’s user experience parameters described below will help inform the evaluation of the initiatives introduced through the Strategy.

### Balance between individual and systemic supports

The strategy adopts a multi-level approach to managing principal health and wellbeing by providing a strong system of supports that can be tailored to meet individual needs. Most leading practice frameworks such as the *Canadian National Standard:* *Psychological health and safety in the workplace[[29]](#footnote-29)* and the *Developing Mentally Healthy Workplaces* *framework (commissioned by the National Mental* *Health Commission in Australia)[[30]](#footnote-30)* recommend a range of initiatives that target wellbeing at an individual, team and organisational level. An effective wellbeing strategy must include a balance of interventions that look at systemic organisational factors such as culture, respect, support, development, workflow, etc. as well as meet the unique context and needs of the individual concerned.



Figure 5: Embedding parameters for delivering a positive user experience

### Combining physical and mental health and safety

The strategy focuses on a holistic model of health and wellbeing that combines aspects of physical health, mental health and safety. A safe and healthy workplace promotes and enhances wellbeing. Adoption of such a holistic model helps ensure more sustainable wellbeing outcomes for individuals over time.

### Enhancing wellbeing across the wellbeing spectrum

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy looks at enhancing wellbeing across the full wellbeing spectrum. This spectrum includes key stages of mental health and wellbeing: flourishing, coping and struggling.



Figure 6: The wellbeing spectrum

Over the course of their lives, individuals may find themselves at different points across this spectrum. Therefore, wellbeing within the principal population may range from positive, healthy functioning at one end, through to severe symptoms that impact on everyday functioning, both in personal and work environments. Different strategies must be incorporated to help enhance wellbeing, no matter where individual principals sit across the wellbeing spectrum.

### Embedding strategies across the employee life-cycle

The Strategy provides support across the different stages of principalship. An employee life-cycle approach considers key stages across a role such as recruitment and selection, induction and on-boarding, performance and engagement, professional development, transitioning and separation. The Department recognises that principals at different stages of their principalship will have differing needs and challenges. Accordingly, the Strategy must ensure systemic interventions are in place to help support principals across their professional life-cycle.

### One size does not fit all

The Strategy aims to take into account the potential impact of different school demographics on operations, leadership and principal wellbeing. For instance, meeting the day-to-day administrative requirements may prove to be more challenging for principals of small schools and for teaching principals, than their counterparts in larger schools with more established leadership teams. Various other school specific differences such as variations in student population characteristics, community demands, location, etc., can all influence the amount of stress experienced by principals. This Strategy aims to ensure that the approaches adopted can be tailored to meet school specific needs, as far as practicable.

# APPENDIX C: CURRENT SUPPORTS AVAILABLE TO PRINCIPALS

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy recognises the importance of ensuring that principals are able to access the right supports at the right times. Accordingly, the Department has curated an extensive list of supports and resources that would be beneficial for principals – personally and as school leaders.

The Department is currently developing the Principals Page + to make it easier for principals to find 'just-in-time' resources and supports. When complete, the Principals Page + will include useful links and support information on a number of relevant issues, including:

* Supporting Principals’ Wellbeing
* Workforce Management
* People Management
* Audit & Risk
* OHS
* Governance Structures
* Strategic Planning
* Performance & Accountability
* School Finances
* Buildings & Infrastructure
* Information Technology
* Professional Learning for Leaders
* Managing Student Behaviours
* Managing the School Community
* Emergency Management
* DET Advisory
* Tools & Resources.
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