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# ‘The load can be unbearable’

## **Isolated principals in Australian small schools**

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# Introduction

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- School leadership in Australia
  
- Three studies of principals:
  - General overview of workload issues:
    - Studies in two Australian states (Tasmania, NSW)
    - International comparisons
  - Special focus: Isolated principals (NSW)

# School leadership

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- Model: broader view
- Context: decentralisation

# The Three Studies

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- Analytic framework
- Research methodology
- **Study 1:** Principals and teachers' workloads (Tasmania)
- **Study 2:** Teachers' and principals' perceptions of involvement in school decision-making (international; Tasmania)
- **Study 3:** The NSW Central School Study

# Study 1: Principals' and teachers' workloads (Tasmania)

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## ■ Key findings:

- 'Very long working hours' (>50hrs per week)
- Changes (eg Inclusion policy)
- Factors that assist principals (eg, people)
- Factors that hinder principals (eg decentralisation; related policies)
- Reluctance for principals to involve teachers in decision-making

## Study 2: Teachers' and principals' perceptions of involvement in school decision-making (Int'l; Tas)

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- International 10 country study:
  - Australia, Canada, China, Hungary, Israel, Japan, The Netherlands, Singapore, South Africa, US
  - Australian contribution: Tasmania
  
- Focus on improvement related to change and responsibilities (primary schools):
  - Principal vs teacher involvement
  - Principals' support of teacher involvement
  - Continuum of principal > teacher responsibilities

## Study 3: The NSW Central School Study

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- Aim: clarify aspects of decentralisation as perceived by current NSW ‘central school’ principals
  - what favoured?
  - what concerns?
- Decentralisation outcomes:
  - expenditure control;
  - student achievement indicators complex and less clear

# Isolation?: ‘The black stump’

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# Endogenous pressure (hours of work)

Principals think they should spend time on ...

<u>Principal task</u>	<u>Less time</u>	<u>Same time</u>	<u>More time</u>
• Student welfare	24%	28%	48%
• <b>Development of school curriculum</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>78%</b>
• <b>Development of teaching/learning programs</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>82%</b>
• <b>Development of student assessment procedures</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>78%</b>
• Development of reporting to parents	4%	48%	48%
• <b>Supervision and mentoring of staff</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>89%</b>
• <b>Professional development at school</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>74%</b>
• Professional development off-site	7%	33%	59%
• Principal's professional development	0	37%	63%

# Exogenous pressure (hours of work):

Principals think that the *DET expects* they should spend time on...

<u>Principal task</u>	<u>Less time</u>	<u>Same time</u>	<u>More time</u>
• Student welfare	4%	42%	54%
• Development of school curriculum	8%	39%	54%
• Development of teaching/learning programs	39%	62%	0
• Development of student assessment procedures	0	31%	69%
• <b>Development of reporting to parents</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>73%</b>
• <b>Supervision and mentoring of staff</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>73%</b>
• Professional development at school	8%	69%	23%
• Professional development off-site	19%	50%	31%
• Principal's professional development	8%	42%	50%

# Intensification of work: Long hours and stress

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- Endogenous pressure:
  - Principals think they should spend more time on principals' tasks
- Exogenous pressure:
  - Principals think that the Department (DET) expects them to spend more time on principals' tasks
- Extended work hours:
  - Interviewed principals talked about working 70–80 hours a week as the norm
- Other studies:
  - Isolated school principals had higher stress and turnover rates than principals in larger centres

# Isolation: Devolution; representing “the Department”

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- “I have a big issue with what I call devolution of responsibility and work load. There are not the people in the corporate side to deal with things anymore and it has to be done at the school level so the work load at the school level has increased inordinately” (Principal S1)
- “The last two principals here were essentially forced out by the local community. One had been here a long time, and fell foul of a particular community group and the other suffered from falsely-based allegations, which created a public scandal.” (Principal S4)
- “I am resigning from the Department in a few weeks” – after the Department supported the complaints of local parents (Principal R1)

# Isolation: Family and social

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- A long way from previous appointments in cities and towns large enough to have a high school.
  - Lack of contact with professional colleagues
  
- Limited employment opportunities for their spouses.
  - Some principals lived 100s of km from their immediate families.
  
- Living as an “outsider” in a small town
  - Some difficulties in making social contacts with locals who already have long-established family connections in the area.

# Career vulnerability

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- “Getting rid of the principal”
  - Principals often commented about how vulnerable they were to any adverse comment in the community.
  
- Harder for female principals
  
- The career trap:
  - When isolated principals move, only a small number seek or gain a promotion.
  - Local selection panels in larger centres do not have a high expectation of applicants from isolated centres.

# Devolved system?

## Principals' views on extent of flexibility

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- The present system can be described as school-based management
  - Polarised response (Strongly agreed/disagreed)
- Task-school has flexibility?

<b>AGREE</b>	<u>Percentage of principals</u>
<b>Student discipline</b>	<b>74%</b>
<b>Student welfare</b>	<b>85%</b>
<b>Teaching core curriculum</b>	<b>78%</b>

<b>DISAGREE</b>	<u>Percentage of principals</u>
<b>Properties</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>Maintenance</b>	<b>70%</b>

## Summary: 'The load can be unbearable'...

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- Bearing the load:
  - Principals' work intensification and hours worked
- Sharing the load:
  - Principals' unwillingness to delegate across all areas
- Supporting the load:
  - impacts on principals of the social and professional distance from head office
- Leading and managing the load:
  - Principals' further career opportunities