

2023 Australian School

Education Leaders Sentiment Index



A new school of thought
in an era of change

Slade Group™



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About this study

The 2023 Australian School Education Leaders Sentiment Index was created by Slade Group through a series of in-depth surveys and interviews with a cross section of highly regarded Australian education leaders. This comprehensive national study of 60 experienced independent and public school leaders examines issues of key importance to contemporary leaders around attraction and retention strategies.

Foreword

Educating the next generation of Australians is a profession that's steeped in both privilege and complexity. It's a delicate balancing act that draws on a rich heritage while evolving to meet future challenges and opportunities.

At the heart of this absorbing and exciting puzzle lie our schools, unified as one in their commitment to excellence but uniquely shaped by the rich diversity of their stakeholders. It's a situation where one size does *not* fit all, tasking leaders with the great responsibility – and also reward – of guiding not only student learning, wellbeing and safety, but also the care and consideration of parents and families, as well as staff and alumni.

In taking the pulse of the industry, Slade's Australian School Education Leaders Sentiment Index illustrates clearly the very real, very particular pressures facing the entire education sector.

These include a national teacher shortage; pandemic fallout and the 'great resignation'; an absence of respect for teachers and the profession; a looming leadership gap if we do not attract, support and retain our emerging leaders; and increased responsibilities and compliance obligations.

“We've never been in a better position to adapt, innovate and grow to meet modern-day demands.”

Dr Toni Meath
Principal and CEO
Melbourne Girls Grammar



It's a combination of elements that, at a surface level, might suggest an educational system at a critical juncture, but history shows us this has always, and constantly, been a sector heavily impacted by societal change. And through the lens of contemporary knowledge, experience and technology, we've never been in a better position to adapt, innovate and grow to meet modern-day demands.

Looking to the recent past, the disruption of the Covid-impacted years sparked the need for rapid innovation in what it means to be an educator. In the digital space, for example, there is now an increased flexibility in defining “where is work” or “where is school”, recognising that while our young people and our teachers were hungry to be back in the classrooms, **there are benefits to schools and their students in maintaining the flexibility of a hybrid model when and where appropriate.**

Exciting opportunities and challenges further exist with the rapid advancement and influence of AI (artificial intelligence). As educators, we must remain curious about its potential to harness the possibilities to learn and grow.

There's also a real appetite for further collaboration and shared learnings as we plot the roadmap of the future of education.

Bringing students, their families, our school stakeholders and the wider community along on our journey is vital. It's about acting consciously to encourage students to use their voices and allow them more agency over their own education, as well as enabling our leaders and educators to make a meaningful difference, and feel appreciated in their efforts. **It's a call to collaboration that has never been greater, or more important.**

Critical to this opportunity is people. We need to nurture visionary educators and strong leaders. We need to entice people to enter the profession, and support them in staying longer.

All educators embark on their career with a higher purpose; we want to teach, we want to engage, we want to make an impact. It's a noble goal, and one that requires us to actively promote and provide development pathways for our young potential leaders to ensure our industry remains in good hands.

The complexities involved in being an educator or school leader can be daunting, but there is nothing like the buzz and hum of a school – and nothing more optimistic. It only takes a walk around the grounds of our schools at lunchtime to be energised by the energy and potential of youth.

There's a palpable sense of excitement in the realm of education – from our classrooms to our boardrooms. It's about purposefully creating space to give everyone a seat at the table, with a willingness to listen and collaborate. We continue building on our strong education foundations with a sense of excitement about what's to come.

Australia has great schools. It has government ministers who believe in education and communities that understand its importance.

Ultimately, the key to success lies in *not* standing still. In continuing to change and develop. In recognising that everything is a teaching moment, including now, for the entire industry.

What an astonishing time to be an educator.

Dr Toni Meath
Principal and CEO
Melbourne Girls Grammar





Executive Summary



Education is one of the most powerful and integral investments society makes in its future. Influential and impactful in every regard, it shapes and underpins how our communities grow, evolve, prosper and thrive. And it's never been more under the spotlight.

With the arrival of the pandemic, educators were forced to pivot in the face of unheralded challenges such as widespread lockdowns and a wholesale transfer to digital learning environments.

These have since eased, but to a point they drew heightened focus to existing challenges across the sector. These ranged from a lack of equity in terms of resources and funding, to the absence of meaningful avenues for educators to contribute to the dialogue around the future of their profession.

As a national specialist recruitment adviser in this sector, it became imperative for Slade Group to engage with education leaders to understand firsthand their challenges, critiques, motivations and experiences. Marrying these with real-world insights, **we have emerged with a picture of education in Australia, and its opportunities for evolution and innovation.**

And so we are proud to present the inaugural Slade Group **Australian School Education Leaders Sentiment Index.**

The team at Slade Group worked with education leaders from across Australia to research an array of issues critical to the health of our education system, from obvious inclusions, such as career progression, to factors including the importance of feedback within the wider school community.

The results were illuminating – both in expected trends and surprising results.

What emerged clearly was that for education leaders, their role is a calling.

Yet it's one where professional satisfaction, progression and even optimism have been heavily impacted by matters outside the classroom – and often outside their control.

It goes some way towards explaining the statistics and headlines around an ongoing exodus of educators from the profession.

Across the subsequent pages we explore the findings of this Index in more depth, pairing the findings with expert commentary from some of Australia's foremost education leaders.

What the results identify is both a significant appetite for change within Australia's education system – and a clear sense of the evolution needed to shape this new direction. One that fosters, encourages and rewards ambitions such as professional learning, but moves beyond the individual to actively pursue a more inclusive and broader-based scope of stakeholder inputs across not just school leadership, but also staff, students and the wider school community.

It's a complex and nuanced call to action, but one that offers an exciting vision of how Australia can reshape its education sector.

For Slade Group, it also represents an inspiring first step towards change, and an incredible opportunity for decision-makers, boards and other governance to comprehensively look at how they should position themselves and their future hiring strategies to ensure they are best placed for top talent to lead and guide their schools.

It's a thoughtful insight that would not have been possible without the education leaders who selflessly gave their time to such an important – and necessary – conversation. To them I give my sincere thanks.

Andrew Barr
Practice Lead, Education

“

What the results identify is both a significant appetite for change within Australia's education system – and a clear sense of the evolution needed to shape this new direction.”



Andrew Barr
Practice Lead, Education
Slade Group

Professional Learning



Professional Learning has emerged as a key focus for Australian education leadership. School leaders and their teaching staff know what they want it to look like, where it excels and where it's falling short.

While shaping young lives is at the core of education, Professional Learning has been identified as a vital part of the fuel that powers educators' abilities, and informs their sentiment, as well as impacting attraction and retention.

Participants in the Index rate professional learning opportunities and culture as top priorities and drawcards in attracting and retaining staff.

Education leaders understand Professional Learning is an additional cost, but most agree there is a balance found in the value it adds to their everyday offering. They know Professional Learning provides ongoing currency, stimulates continuous improvement for staff and, ultimately, benefits students. Moreover, they have an innate appreciation for the value of lifelong learning for educators, and how it enhances, energises and informs career trajectories.

"Undertaking Professional Learning is vital to improve your offering to students," Andy Müller, Principal at Scotch Oakburn College, Launceston, says.

“Education is constantly changing as society changes and a good Professional Learning strategy helps us to stay on top of those changes.”

Andy Müller
Principal
Scotch Oakburn College
Launceston



Relevance is key

In flagging the importance of Professional Learning, educators are clearly identifying what it should look like to be effective and meaningful.

Educators value their time and want Professional Learning that is relevant to their roles, delivered within school hours. They say it should be tailored to a wide variety of needs, and examined closely to ensure the message is applicable.

When it comes to their own learning, educators don't want to simply tick a box. A strong desire has emerged for education professionals to be in control of their own learning opportunities.

Index respondents want the autonomy to choose their own Professional Learning journey, to select courses and workshops that provide meaningful knowledge and skills.

Respondents say a 'one size fits all' approach to Professional Learning does not recognise experience or seniority, and appetite for formal, generic, and sometimes external-led sessions – unless targeting niche subjects – is lower than for targeted sessions that directly impact performance for educators and outcomes for students. "Informed finessing" can help to gauge which courses are most applicable to which educators. Some courses apply to all, and others should be more of a niche offering – and service the dynamic needs of subjects and faculties.

Integrating formal, external expert sessions with more informal, regular check-ins with leaders and colleagues is proving successful for improving sentiment at St Francis Xavier College, Melbourne, Deputy Principal Jason Hibberd says.

"If it's topical and aligns with strategic direction, we will engage external professionals to work with College executive members, who in turn then look to influence key stakeholders within the school community. And for all staff we have professional learning forums and a self-paced online hub, containing Professional Learning courses that staff can access at school and complete self-paced modules," he says.

“All of our efforts must fit the criteria of adding value to the things we do.”

Educators also understand the need for Professional Learning to address diversity within the classroom in terms of gender, race, language and neurodiversity, with a respondent saying, “relevant PD is very important, not just with regards to subject matter but also diversity in the classroom”.

Professional learning and professional growth

This Index has revealed a desire from some to see a greater alignment between Professional Learning and salaries, offering recognition for education leaders’ efforts in completing extra studies that fulfill requirements and also add value to their offering at an administrative and educational level.



“*When the worst that happens, if you don’t do well on a performance and development process, is that you get more support and more training, it’s a big benefit and impetus to stay.*”



Lauren Sayer
Executive Director,
Research and Innovation
Melbourne Girls Grammar

Melbourne Girls Grammar Executive Director of Research and Innovation, Lauren Sayer, however, believes the flipside is more beneficial.

“From our experience, deciding as a school not to link the two puts us in a really good place for learning,” she says.

“Getting educators at all levels to sit down and have a chat in performance and development groups of where they are at and where they want to grow is more important. As leaders, taking it further and showing our own development plan, a bit of vulnerability in where we feel we need to grow, helps create that safe space.”

Past informs the future

Some respondents say, historically, Professional Learning was more targeted and beneficial, and today’s offerings can be more about compliance.

A respondent says: “In recent years, schools and teachers have been buried under mountains of compliance obligations (including risk assessments, first aid, child safety and cyber safety) to the point where Professional Learning has become unpopular.”

While this may be true for some schools, Melbourne Girls Grammar’s Lauren Sayer believes schools offer incredible collaborative spaces for meaningful Professional Learning.

Scotch Oakburn College’s Andy Müller agrees and says broadening the search can help enhance skills and career aspirations.

“Some of the Professional Learning I’ve experienced has been a real game changer and, interestingly, some of this has been from outside of the education sector,” he says. “These have included strategic leadership courses through universities that I have found invaluable.”

For school leaders, access to and completion of further studies in management, psychology and neuroscience, as well as peer-exchange and conference programs with affiliates in Australia and abroad, have augmented knowledge and boosted satisfaction across a range of schools.

Mentoring and Coaching

Throughout the Index, education leaders identified **Mentoring and Coaching** as two key areas of value for educators, who say they would prefer to give than receive.

Not surprisingly, given education is a giving profession, **more than half of respondents say they want to be mentored, while three quarters of participants expressed a desire to mentor or coach a colleague in their next leadership role.** These education leaders are also focused on giving back to the next generation, with **the majority of respondents wanting to mentor or coach up-and-coming teachers** within their school communities.

Given this passion to help less experienced colleagues gain positive role modelling and experience from senior staff, education leaders say Mentoring and Coaching should always form part of the attraction and attention strategy for schools. Programs allowing those who have the time, energy and skills to impart knowledge can set the stage for meaningful support and education.

Mentoring and Coaching is also something education leaders desire for their own career advancement. More than half of respondents would be swayed to accept a particular position over another if there were clear and structured Mentoring and Coaching opportunities. Clearly, schools could provide this form of inducement to attract high-

calibre applicants to their senior roles.

Lauren Sayer, Executive Director of Research and Innovation at Melbourne Girls Grammar, says a strong mentoring program is vital.

“We must support the amazing young teachers we have to help them grow. I’ve had incredible supports and mentors in my career, so the most pressing issue for me is making sure we support and grow all our teachers,” she says.

However, she says support shouldn’t be imposed on educators, rather offered as a way to improve performance using evidence-based strategies.

“Mentoring should occur in a safe environment, not be punitive, nor include judgment,” she says.

Offering in-classroom mentoring in several week blocks and inter-school learning are collaborative approaches that can benefit educators and in turn, students, and also improve organisational culture.

The value placed on good leadership

More than half of educators are looking to work with a leader who is widely regarded for their thinking and work. This suggests that investing in leaders and bolstering their skill-set and knowledge has a two-fold payback of equipping the education leaders with specialist experience, while also serving to attract quality people for support roles. The school community can only gain from this investment.

Similarly, good leaders attract good deputies, with **more than half of educators looking to learn more by shadowing their leaders.**

Headmaster of Scotch College, Perth, Dr Alec O’Connell says built-in formal mentoring structures have a vital role, as do natural connections.

“People link up not just for content or knowledge, but they just get on with the person. And people have mentors outside of the place they work at as well. There’s a lot of naturalness about mentoring,” he says.

“*Everyone needs great mentors. And through mentoring programs, the information we give should not just be our personal narrative, it should be based off research and evidence. That puts us in a much better place as a profession.*”

*Lauren Sayer
Executive Director,
Research and Innovation
Melbourne Girls Grammar*

“ Sometimes when we get too formalised around the program, it becomes just another thing you have to do, to pass and check boxes.”



Dr Alec O'Connell
Headmaster
Scotch College, Perth

Education leaders see the value in giving and receiving Mentoring and Coaching and believe those providing this to colleagues, as well as those who seek out opportunities themselves, should be rewarded through enhanced remuneration.



Some report naturally providing Mentoring and Coaching to their team, while not receiving similar from education departments or boards, with a respondent saying, “As a principal, I naturally perform both structured and unstructured mentoring and coaching, whilst getting very little myself.”

While it is almost universally recognised as important, some education leaders report an ad hoc approach to Mentoring and Coaching, with a respondent saying mentoring is not always given the attention it deserves.

“Only one school I worked in has ever given it the attention it deserves and the budget for this was hefty. I absolutely appreciated it and have drawn on what I have learned in every role I have taken at other schools thereafter,” they say.

Andy Müller, Principal at Scotch Oakburn College, Launceston, says mentoring has a positive impact on new staff and new graduates.

“Good professional rapport is essential to thrive in education. We line up our people with a mentor for professional advice and support and a buddy to discuss the generalities of being in a classroom. We also have a level of collegial coaching looking at what’s working, the evidence around that and what to aim for next. We also are looking at how we can get our people more comfortable in the coaching space,” he says.

“ We’re now having to be counsellors, mentors, sometimes confidants. All staff need to be equipped and trained to deal with a range of scenarios across mental health and first aid far more than they did 10 years ago.”



Andy Müller
Principal
Scotch Oakburn College
Launceston

A future view

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, Principal of Bialik College in Melbourne, believes Australia needs to invest in an outward-looking focus.

“We are an isolated community at the edge of the world, and at Bialik College, we are fortunate to have the policy and resources to send people abroad, to Italy, to Israel, to Harvard, every year. They learn from colleagues there and bring that knowledge back to enrich our experience,” he says.

Mentoring should also extend outside the curriculum and teaching skillset into emotional management and other areas, say school leaders.



Voice and Influence

This key theme ranks as highly important for education leaders, above Career Progression and Remuneration, Professional Learning, Reputation, and Mentoring and Coaching.

Education leaders don't just want to be employed; they want to be heard. And they want schools to embrace input and feedback from myriad sources.

All Index respondents said they valued employers who treat their thoughts and opinions with consideration and respect, and all value schools that are open to positive and constructive change.

Teaching follows a continual improvement agenda, and this includes a desire to see that in student outcomes and in school communities. Education leaders unanimously say they want schools to listen to feedback and incorporate it into how teaching unfolds at their school.

Education leaders emphatically support schools that listen, with intent, to the opinions, thoughts and ideas of students. Leaders also value the input of other stakeholders. **They value a school that listens to opinions and suggestions from other stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, students and the wider school community, and believe they shape the students' experiences.**

"This is why it's crucial that we listen to and engage with our staff, along with our students, parents and the wider community", a respondent says.

"Those are the key components to a healthy school community; staff, students and parents. We need to keep taking the pulse, to ensure staff feel like they belong, they're making a difference, they can see that difference in their work, and they feel supported. The same applies to the students in that regard. And usually if these students go home and tell their parents they're enjoying school, the parents are happy, too."

Education leaders feel strongly about encouraging wider input at schools, highlighting student advocacy and openness to creativity and change as critical values.

"Listening to these things is important but acting on and balancing them is the challenge for those making the decisions," a respondent says.

There is a degree of cognitive dissonance in this area, with educators wanting themselves, their students and their communities considered, while, in practice, some feel schools do not actively listen to, or act on feedback.

Stakeholders, in some cases, also don't take advantage of opportunities to have their say. An example of this being time-poor parents increasingly shifting responsibility onto schools, and not wanting to attend important information events.

Some education leaders say school communities are too bureaucratic, resistant to change and averse to taking their suggestions on board.

Schools that are more flexible and open to changing areas of concern identified by their leaders, and to a lesser degree, students, stand to attract and retain excellent teachers. School boards and state education departments must listen to the educators and professionals at the coalface, those leading the institutions and talking to teachers, students and parents every day.



The schools, departments and boards who do this will be rewarded by a more engaged leadership and will benefit from implanting and driving positive and constructive change within their local community.

“*A school leader's job is to make sure there's a culture of appreciation across the board of learning, and there's an appreciation of balance. I tell students, do your best and we will back you.*”

*Dr Alec O'Connell
Headmaster
Scotch College, Perth*

Scotch College Perth's Headmaster, Dr Alec O'Connell, says success is about belonging. "Schools should be measured more on what our community looks and feels like," he says.

The lesson to employers is clear: listen to those who are there day-to-day and adopt a continuous improvement policy and strategy.

Motivated to give back

Despite many changes within the sector, education is still regarded as a vocation and a passion, over and above a first rate career.

Carey Baptist Grammar School Principal Jonathan Walter says that sense of satisfaction is the “beauty of the job”.

“Every day you come to work and you know that you’ve made a difference in someone’s life, be it a staff member, a student or a member of their family, because of what you’ve done. Either to grow them as an individual or help them through a difficult situation or resolve a conflict for them. Not every profession has that, and for us it happens every day. We’re very fortunate,” he says.

“*Every day you come to work and you know that you’ve made a difference in someone’s life, be it a staff member, a student or a member of their family, because of what you’ve done.*”



Jonathan Walter
Principal
Carey Baptist Grammar School

Dr Toni Meath, Principal and CEO of Melbourne Girls Grammar, says today’s school leaders and educators feel strongly about their school’s culture, and being able to positively influence and enhance it.

“There is a great desire to collaborate and build culture, to contribute to the greater good,” she says.

St Francis Xavier College, Melbourne, Deputy Principal Jason Hibberd agrees that actively fostering a strong, supportive culture is vital.



“For educators, feeling connected with their roles, being supported by their peers, leaders and the wider school community, and being engaged with students, all influence their ability to add value,” he says.

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, Principal of Melbourne’s Bialik College, says many teachers embark on the career after achieving success in previous careers, drawn to the idea of giving back and shaping future generations.

“Some of our strongest classroom teachers are those who are coming in for second and third careers,” Mr Stowe-Lindner says.

Lauren Sayer, Executive Director of Research and Innovation at Melbourne Girls Grammar agrees.

“I’m seeing engineers and people from other professions coming into teaching. I know a lawyer who has come into teaching recently. How amazing is that for a legal studies class?” she says.

“I worked in technology sales for a while, came back and it made me a better educator. We need to flip this fear around leaving the profession because some people will leave and move on, but some will leave and come back and become much more amazing teachers as a result.”

“*Students don’t learn subjects, they learn teachers.*”

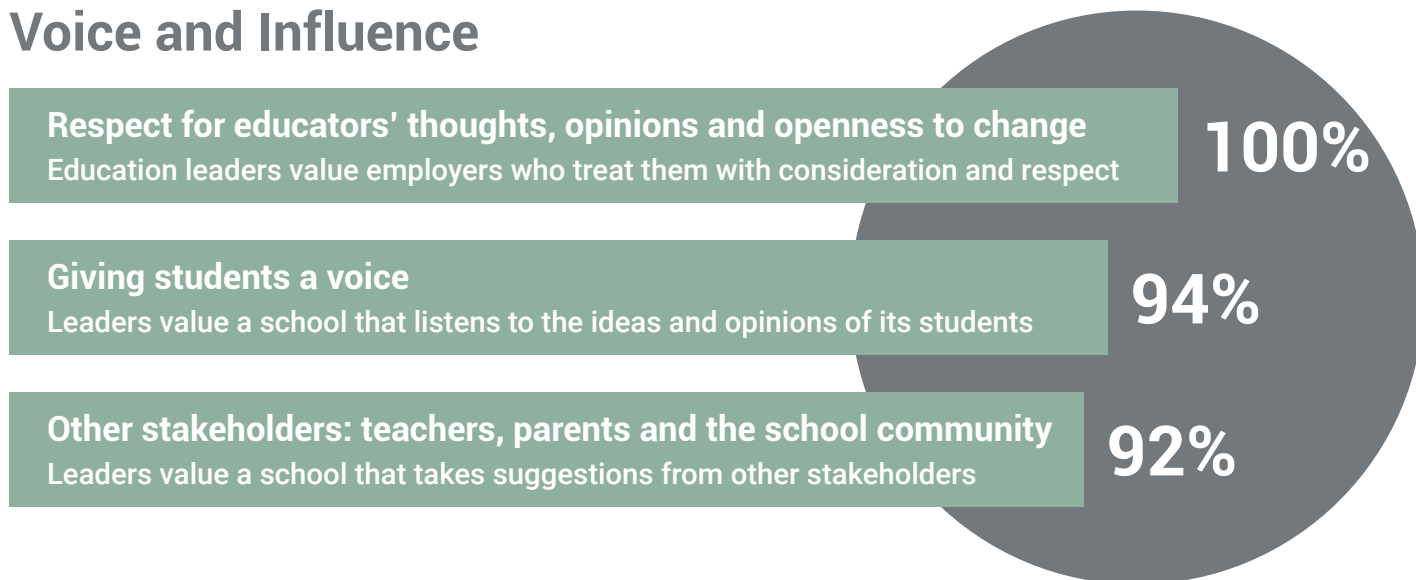


Jason Hibberd
Deputy Principal
St Francis Xavier College
Melbourne

The Results

Below are the key themes from conversations with education leaders and the relative importance of those themes in attracting and retaining high performers.

Voice and Influence



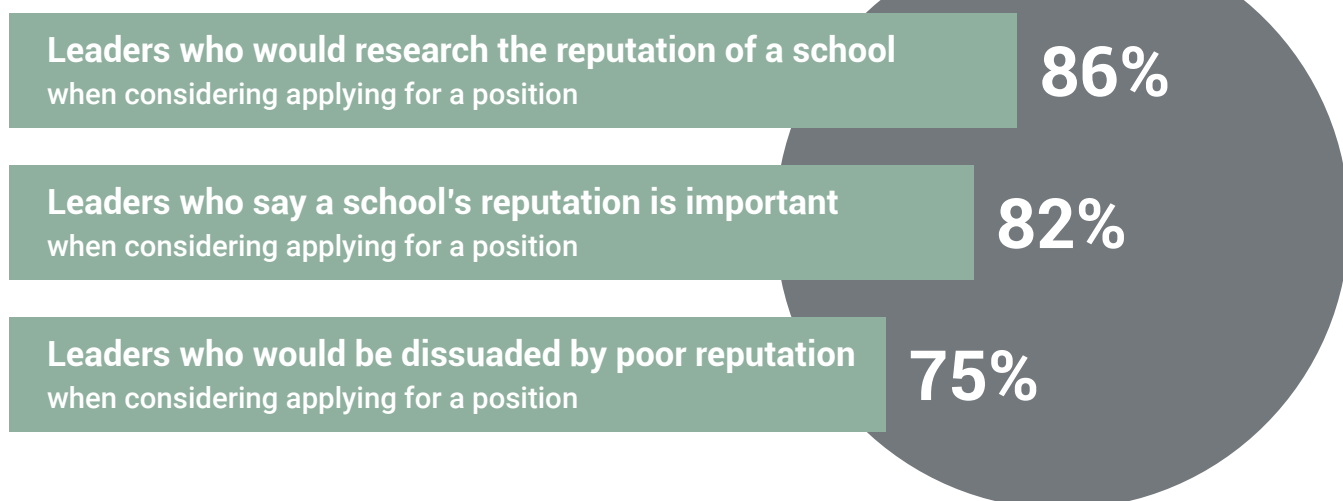
Professional Learning



Career Progression and Remuneration



Reputation



Mentoring and Coaching



Reputation

Australian education leaders understand reputations matter and are thorough in their research when considering where to work.

Index respondents say they will research a school's reputation prior to applying for a position and this includes seeking opinions from trusted co-workers, family and friends.

When it comes to considering applying for a role, **they say a school's reputation plays a large part in their decision-making.**

Overt micromanagement, poor leadership or unnecessary board interference can cloud a school's otherwise good reputation in the eyes of job-seeking educators and leaders, with **most saying these factors would dissuade them from chasing employment opportunities.**

Culture and community

Andy Müller, Principal at Scotch Oakburn College, Launceston, says families are the greatest asset in terms of bolstering a school's reputation.

"Parents who are pleased with their kid's education talk to other parents recommending the school. This provides a positive culture for the school within the community. This also helps with retaining staff. And while high retention rates are good, people also still need to evolve with the school," he says.

School leaders find their research in key areas allows them to "take the pulse" of the school, including on staff turnover. Not surprisingly, schools with a revolving door of teachers starting and finishing in quick succession are deemed an unattractive option.

However, as Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, Principal of Melbourne's Bialik College notes, high staff turnover may not necessarily reflect a difficult workplace.

"Since Covid, our turnover has been pretty normal. But certainly in the past year, after two years of very low turnover, we had a higher turnover. This was overwhelmingly dominated by people retiring or leaving the profession," he says.

"A lot of people are looking at their careers, weighing up possibilities and thinking, 'maybe I need to do something else'. At the same time, we've had record applicants for roles, which tells me everybody is rethinking."

"We need to be thinking differently about who we recruit, where they are placed, and for what purpose."



Jeremy Stowe-Lindner
Principal
Bialik College, Melbourne

Other school leaders echo Mr Stowe-Lindner's comments, agreeing that this en-masse shift of professionals is circling around, as educators from elsewhere also pursue something new.

Ability to make a difference

While a school's reputation elicits strong opinions, it is only part of educators' overall decision-making when applying for senior leadership roles.

Respondents say reputation is based on more than a single factor and requires commitment and application.

"Those reputations worth having take time to develop; consistently being highly regarded is a prime objective," an Index respondent says.

Educators and education leaders are all motivated differently, however most join the profession to "make a difference".

One respondent says, "In schools where you have the ability to contribute in a sustaining meaningful way, to affect change and restructure towards improved outcomes, the challenge becomes a motivating factor. In schools that like to maintain the status quo and roll out the traditions of 20th-century teaching and learning, rather than looking for new 21st-century ways, the challenge is greater and far less fulfilling."



The ability of a school to pivot in the face of challenges and embrace new challenges – be they pandemic-related, technology and AI-related or operational in nature – also paints a picture in the eyes of the entire school community, from students and parents to current and future employees.



Education departments and school boards should look at reputation as a key part of their strategy to attract and retain highly skilled education leaders and educators, particularly in the post-Covid employment landscape.

There is a perception that, as a result of the skills shortage post-Covid, employees have the upper hand in choosing where and how they work.

Bialik College's Jeremy Stowe-Lindner says, "I think there is a feeling, and a reality that the seller's market has become a buyer's market for recruitment." The reputation of education, overall, also plays a part.

"The industry is always at a critical juncture, including now," says Scotch College Perth Headmaster Dr Alec O'Connell. "But there's that great saying; when the tide comes in, all boats lift. That's what we should be trying to increase, our tideline."

"And Covid did do that for a while (when parents gained more of an understanding via home schooling), however it has been interesting watching perceptions slip back," he says.

Scotch Oakburn College's Andy Müller agrees and says schools have the power to tell their own stories. "Society is changing and if our role is about preparing young people for society, then we've got to change with it."

“ Every sector has its issues and challenges. We just have to create a more positive rhetoric around education.”

*Dr Alec O'Connell
Headmaster
Scotch College, Perth*

Career Progression and Remuneration

Career progression matters to Australian educators and education leaders – but money isn't as important as one might expect – and ideals around professional advancement are a work in evolution.

The responses captured for this category support the overarching theme of the Index, which is that modern measures of success go beyond dollars, cents and titles.

Educators and education leaders are realistic. They understand Career Progression and Remuneration are important in terms of maintaining a good standard of living, feeling rewarded by their workplace and staying interested in their field of work.

Very few educators and leaders prioritised salary and career opportunities over other motivations when considering new roles. Instead, it appears career progression, including a realistic pathway to holistic development, is of more value.

On the subject of whether career progression holds a higher priority than remuneration, respondents supported this statement.

What does this mean at a practical level? Career progression leads to increased remuneration. Educators and education leaders naturally want to see their qualifications, Professional Learning endeavours and skills appreciated by their employers, and to advance their careers. They want to see their capabilities recognised in meaningful ways, with opportunities to bring them into play and use them to tackle fresh roles and/or challenges. They want to be valued for the skills and experience they bring into the school grounds every day.

As one respondent noted: “I would hope my experience and qualifications would be considered.”

Another says: “Each employee needs to feel their good health and professional growth is important to those who are leading them.”

More than money

Jonathan Walter, Principal of Carey Baptist Grammar School in Melbourne, agrees pay is only part of the mix.

“Educators work hard, and appreciate their pay, but absolutely there’s more to job satisfaction than the pay,” he says. “And I know these educators and leaders want to grow; to expand their abilities.

“Increasingly we’re seeing a real desire from our staff to want to work on something with a real purpose that aligns with their values. They want to be involved in something that’s doing good in the world.

“Building that sense of hope and optimism in their workspace is really important because they’re wanting to make a contribution to making the world a better place and creating good young people. And so if that’s part of the equation of doing the job, then that becomes a really important, satisfying factor that is critical to our mix.”

For schools looking to attract talent, educators and leaders are generally interested in identifying schools with a dedicated budget for their Professional Learning.





This suggests schools and boards that prioritise meaningful Professional Learning and Career Progression, considering this in their recruitment strategies, would be a more attractive choice for educators seeking a new school or role.

Expectation to grow professionally

Carey Baptist Grammar School Principal Jonathan Walter says Career Progression is “absolutely an opportunity and an expectation around every staff member growing”.

“Increasingly we’re seeing a real desire from our staff to want to work on something with a real purpose that aligns with their values.”

*Jonathan Walter
Principal
Carey Baptist Grammar School*

“With key values around care, respect and growth, not only is it important to support our students’ growth, but there’s an expectation and a desire from us as leaders to grow every individual staff member in the school as well,” he says.

“It’s also important to be open to all sorts of versions of what that looks like, including the fact that wellbeing needs to be a component of that professional learning, because we want every staff member to take that personal responsibility for their own wellbeing while being supported to do so.”

Dr Toni Meath, Principal and CEO of Melbourne Girls Grammar, says embracing a performance and development culture strengthens staff satisfaction across all levels.

“Valuing performance and development could look like encouraging staff to do postgraduate study, offering professional learning fellowships, making innovation grants available, enlisting instructional coaches or peer support and mentoring to progress skills and roles,” she says.

Dr Meath says there is a need for a stronger focus on wellbeing, across a school’s entire ecosystem.

“This can extend to having a wellbeing framework across the school, from students to staff, to proactively show schools value mental, physical and social health,” she says.

“Having a really collegial environment, including things such as an active staff association, sports programs, book clubs, employee assistance programs – all those extra-curricular elements that students love – also benefits educators and school leaders.”

Shifting perceptions

There is also an appetite to shift the focus away from bonuses or incentives for meeting KPIs.

Melbourne Girls Grammar Executive Director of Research and Innovation Lauren Sayer says many schools use performance and development processes as almost a “punitive sort of salary progression mechanism”. She believes there’s merit to instead linking salary and progression to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Australian Professional Standards for Teachers as a benchmark.

It’s all part of a wider conversation and evolution about what career progression and development looks like.

To this end, Andy Müller, Principal at Scotch Oakburn College, Launceston, says cost-of-living pressures also impact staff and the take-up of roles.

“Schools in the independent sector need to balance out salary increases with revenues,” he says.

Mr Müller says career progression can grow out of looking for opportunities and being interested in different roles.

“I loved teaching in the classroom, but I encourage teachers who want to progress their careers to take on leadership roles when they are confident in their teaching,” he says.

Other Challenges and Solutions for Today's Education Leaders

Today's educators and their leaders face myriad challenges... staff and student wellbeing, sector-specific issues, technology advancements, staying relevant and up-to-date, the purpose of education and specific challenges facing today's leaders. Below are just a few extra priorities presented to today's leaders.

1

WELLBEING

Jonathan Walter, Principal of Carey Baptist Grammar School in Melbourne: "So much has changed in the last four or five years in particular, and I think we are at a really interesting time with the complexity of issues for students, staff and parents all converging at a great rate. Just the pace of the social change before us, the levels of anxiety carried within the community more broadly, and the convergence of that in a caring environment makes for an incredibly dynamic place, which requires huge adaptability and flexibility in our response to it. But I think having a more compassionate leadership style than we've ever required before to just deal with this very real reality now that everyone's dealing with something. A lot of the issues are quite complex issues that compound."

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, Principal of Melbourne's Bialik College, acknowledged Covid was still having an impact on the sector, including general wellbeing: "I think what's really come to the fore is wellbeing – the wellbeing of our student cohort coming out of Covid, the wellbeing of our parent contingency, and their barometers and tolerance levels for things that may have been more tolerable before. I think we are seeing a rise in the sector of anxiety, and that presents in different ways. It can present behaviourally, it can present from a learning perspective, it presents in teenagers in eating disorders, and in related ways too."

Andy Muller, Principal at Scotch Oakburn College, Launceston: "The mental health and welfare of our students is the single biggest issue. There are other ones, but that's probably the most worrying. I talk about welfare as well. It also concerns me around things like social media, drugs and alcohol. But the incredible spike in mental health issues and anxiety and depression amongst our young people is just a really difficult issue to manage with

so many external factors involved that are outside of a school's control. And then there's vaping. That affects their health and, of course, they all think they're bulletproof, 'It's safer than smoking, so we'll vape, it looks cool', but we know that's not the case."

2

SOCIETAL PRESSURES

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, Principal of Melbourne's Bialik College, looked to challenges facing the education sector: "The challenge of quality of education, of educational outcomes, of staff recruitment, of retention, of fundraising, of change management, all those things are the bread and butter of leadership. There's a workplace shift going on. I think we're finding it more and more difficult to get people at entry level in and I think we are seeing wage inflation. We're also seeing some new trends of people wanting a full-time role, with a full-time salary, but only wanting to work four days instead of five."

Andy Müller, Principal at Scotch Oakburn College Launceston: "The real spike in mental health started 10 to 12 years ago with the rise of social media. Constant feelings of inadequacy, cyber bullying, being exposed to content that you are not cognitively mature enough to process; this has had a deleterious effect on mental health. Combining this with climate change, a general sense of helplessness and a 'you only live once' mentality has compounded the problem."

“

The mental health and welfare of our students is the single biggest issue... the most worrying.”

Andy Müller
Principal
Scotch Oakburn College
Launceston

3

TECHNOLOGY

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, Principal of Melbourne's Bialik College: "I think there are enormous technological opportunities coming through. I am particularly excited about AI."

Lauren Sayer, Executive Director of Research and Innovation, Melbourne Girls Grammar: "Education has always been challenged by technological changes. People thought calculators would hinder maths education, Wikipedia would hinder research. Now the naysayers are saying AI like ChatGPT will adversely affect education. Our job is to move with the times and explore the point of critical growth. We will continue to evolve in a positive way. We've got a really unique opportunity right now with the advent of artificial intelligence and ChatGPT. And I'm excited about looking at changing the way we do assessment across schools and moving beyond just the right answer."

4

STAYING CURRENT

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, Principal of Melbourne's Bialik College, on staying up to date with educational trends overseas: "I think in Australia in particular, there needs to be an investment in an outward-looking focus. We are an isolated community at the edge of the world. When you are at the end of the train line, you need to make a purposeful decision to go out and bring back in, otherwise you get pretty insular. There is a danger being a relatively isolated community, and we may not like to hear it, but we are at risk of becoming a little too introspective, and not that we should jump at the latest fad, but we should be embracing and exploring what other people are spending far more money on in the research that they're doing. I love that we're a fast follower. We very rarely do things first. I love following other people who have made all their mistakes and then go, 'Let's do it that way then'. There are pockets of brilliance coming out of quite a few different places. I think Reggio Emilia in Italy is producing some outstanding approaches, materials and philosophies. I think Project Zero at the University of Harvard is really at the forefront of what thinking, and what critical thinking, should be looking like in a 21st century environment. I think the UK has got some great lessons in success and failure, and you learn as much from failure as you do from success."

Lauren Sayer, Executive Director of Research and Innovation, Melbourne Girls Grammar: "I look around at the new teachers coming in who want to make sure that education looks amazing over the next 10 to 20 years. Their first year in the classroom excites them. We are also seeing teachers coming from other careers and real quality coming through thanks to their varied experience."

5

THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, Principal of Melbourne's Bialik College, on the various roles of schools: "Number one is a high achievement, number two is broad experiences, and number three is how to be a nice person, and if a school does those three things for its stakeholders, that's it. It's really not complicated. For some, high achievement will be a trade route, for some, it will be a traditional academic route. Again, it's not about high VCE results – it's high achievement, be nice, and have broad experiences, and you'll be fine. That's actually what schooling's about, in my opinion."

Lauren Sayer, Executive Director of Research and Innovation, Melbourne Girls Grammar: "Teaching is the most important job in the world. We are educating the future leaders and workers and minds. And you can't help but marvel how important that is."

“

I think in Australia, in particular, there needs to be an investment in an outward-looking focus. We are an isolated community at the edge of the world. And when you are at the end of the train line, you need to make a purposeful decision to go out and bring back in. Otherwise, you become pretty insular."

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner
Principal
Bialik College, Melbourne

“Society is changing and if our role is about preparing young people for society, then we’ve got to change with it.”

Andy Müller
Principal
Scotch Oakburn College
Launceston

“Teaching is the most important job in the world. We are educating the future leaders and workers and minds. And you can’t help but marvel how important that is.”

Lauren Sayer
Executive Director,
Research and Innovation
Melbourne Girls Grammar

6

THE CHALLENGES FACING PRINCIPALS

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, Principal of Melbourne’s Bialik College: “I think the challenge of principalship is that you are more and more distant from the craft of teaching, and you need to go into classes to continually be inspired by the developing craft that is going on around you. I think the challenge though is that practice, practice, practice is such a fundamental part of success, and a principal, nowadays, rarely teaches, and if they do, they teach irregularly. So, I have to find ways of being inspired by other educators in the core of what I do, knowing that that is not something I could inspire others on. Go into a year eight class on a Friday afternoon and they will humble you.”

Lauren Sayer, Executive Director of Research and Innovation, Melbourne Girls Grammar: “Throughout my career advancement, I have always ensured I keep teaching. It keeps me current, it keeps me in touch with why I chose this profession. I also question a lot of the media coverage about education. Teachers on the whole are very positive of what’s next.”

7

INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

Lauren Sayer, Executive Director of Research and Innovation, Melbourne Girls Grammar: “Offering new subject areas like project management gives our pupils a real sense of achievement. From redesigning office buildings to school uniforms, managing events and developing a learning in nature program with our kindergarten, these subjects spark our students’ imaginations and invoke critical thinking and teamwork.”





In Conclusion

Engaging directly with leaders about their work on the frontline of the education sector allows us to understand firsthand their challenges, critiques and motivations. Marrying these with real-world insights, we emerge with a picture of education in Australia and a roadmap of where it *could* go.

As a national specialist recruitment adviser in the field of education, Slade Group embarked on this significant piece of research to create a comprehensive portrait of contemporary sentiment and expectations.

As we reflect on the evolution of education in Australia, the detail that has emerged from this inaugural Slade Group **Australian School Education Leaders Sentiment Index** is fascinating. It gives decision-makers and Boards in the education sector a clear and insightful opportunity to assess their own position and shape their future hiring strategies to secure the right talent to lead and guide their schools.

The research goes beyond traditional markers of professional satisfaction and success. It showcases the mindset of education leaders and their perspective on issues they view as essential. Issues like the strength of school communities, the focus on wellbeing and the mindset of our next generation (and their parents) as they grapple with issues such as growing levels of anxiety.

It makes for a powerful statement, not only in information, but also in the meaningful trends that emerge. It's something which would not have been possible without the selfless contributions of myriad educators, both those who completed our survey and those who so generously contributed further expert guidance. To them, we offer our sincere thanks for being part of such a necessary conversation.

At a surface level, the themes which have emerged as priorities for contemporary Australian educators are: Voice and Influence and Career Progression.

Drilling down to more comprehensively analyse the responses, an interplay of factors – from changing technology to the difficulties of getting staff in at an entry level – creates a more nuanced view of priorities and practicalities.

Looking at Professional Learning, for example, there is a clear split between positive and negative views on its importance. This speaks to a schism around how it's undertaken and to what purpose.

For education leaders who are expected to complete Professional Learning commitments in their own time, or meet compliance requirements without tailored training, it's overwhelmingly viewed as more of an obligation than a genuine avenue for career progression. Yet in environments where it's relevant, supported and funded, the opportunity for Professional Learning can be rated as equally important to salary.

Similarly, when you look at the category of Mentoring and Coaching, the proportion of people looking for Mentoring and Coaching in a new role – while significant – is dwarfed by those looking to serve as a mentor/coach and pass on their professional wisdom. This may reflect a missed opportunity by the sector to draw on the insights and experiences of senior leaders.

In Voice and Influence, our questions drew a unilateral response – respondents value an employer who values their thoughts and opinions. They also value a school that is open to positive and constructive change. Universally, survey respondents want a school that listens to student opinions, thoughts and ideas, and a school that listens to opinions and suggestions from other stakeholders in the school community.

It is broadly evident that regardless of their own circumstances, educators share a strong appetite for the kind of meaningful and widespread change that comes from a conscious commitment to progress. It's counterintuitive for education leaders to agitate on their own behalf or for schools to lead in isolation. Change needs to be driven by the education sector as a whole, working in consultation with its communities, from teachers and students to other stakeholders, including parents.

This insightful comment by one survey respondent puts it best:

"Nurturing one's power to exercise voice, active listening to the voices of others and a desire to bring voices to the conversation is essential in all learning environments."

In the words of another:

"In schools that like to maintain the status quo, and roll out the traditions of 20th century teaching and learning rather than looking for new 21st century ways, the challenge will be greater and far less fulfilling. I like the idea of working in a school to 'make a difference'."

These striking viewpoints coalesce into one key takeaway that unites respondents from independent and public schools, in every year level and across every state: education is a calling. And one of which Australians everywhere can be incredibly proud.

"Nurturing one's power to exercise voice, active listening to the voices of others and a desire to bring voices to the conversation is essential in all learning environments."

Index Respondent

"Educators and school leaders are incredibly future focused. They want to think about the future and think about their kind of imprint on that. And that's part of their everyday narrative."

*Dr Toni Meath
Principal and CEO
Melbourne Girls Grammar*

Education Recruitment Specialists

Slade Group is a highly regarded recruitment practice with more than 25 years of education sector industry specialisation. We have extensive experience and contemporary knowledge of the education sector, with an enviable track record of recruiting roles in schools, universities, other tertiary institutions and education bodies across Australia and internationally.

Andrew Barr, Practice Lead – Education, is an experienced education leader, having been a Principal of two Independent schools in two different states of Australia. He is also a Past National Chair of AHISA (Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia), past Director of Principals Australia Institute and a past Director of Round Square (an international association of schools).

From these roles, he has considerable experience and understanding of what schools need in the recruitment of key staff, from the appointment of Principals to other senior leaders such as Deputy Principals, Business Managers, Heads of School, Directors of Development and Community Relations, Heads of Teaching and Learning, Heads of Department and Teachers.

The appointment of quality staff is crucial for any school, helping to develop a strong learning culture for the benefit of the entire school community. The role of the recruitment specialist is to work closely with the Principal or governing body towards that aim, knowing the school and its needs well and providing expertise and guidance through the process.

A specialist search process ensures the best possible staff are secured, not just the best available or the best among those who might apply to an advertisement. We have a very strong network of connections among school leaders in Australia and overseas, and an extensive knowledge of schools and possible candidates.

Andrew Barr also has considerable experience consulting to school leaders on a range of matters such as:

- Leadership structures and development
- Architectural designs
- Change processes and management
- Strategic and master planning
- Operational advice

Please don't hesitate to contact us for more information.



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