Independent Schools Victoria

MONASH University

Agile leadership in times of crisis

What does it take to lead an Independent school through a pandemic?

Foreword

It's an understatement to say that being a school principal is challenging, even at the best of times.

As leaders of dynamic human organisations, large and small, principals deal with constant and sometimes conflicting demands. Their focus always is on the education and wellbeing of their students. At the same time, they have to meet the needs of staff and respond to the reasonable (and sometimes unreasonable) expectations of parents. And then there are the complex operational challenges – financial, administrative and legal - of ensuring the immediate and long-term sustainability of their school.

All of these challenges are compounded in a crisis. COVID-19 is a crisis like no other and it has placed an extraordinary burden on principals.

It has required them to adapt quickly to the imposition of remote learning as a result of school lockdowns, a technological and a human challenge for all involved – students, teachers and parents.

They have had to adapt to sudden shifts in official health advice and government directives, a task made more difficult when advice and directives are complex and sometimes conflict. They have to respond and provide reassurance to their communities that often demand what COVID denies – certainty and consistency. They have to lead, displaying outward confidence when they themselves are tired, anxious and unsure.

This research report confirms the crucial importance of leadership in a crisis, revealing how Independent school principals confronted the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19. It shows how they adapted and placed a priority on people and relationships, even as they dealt with their own stress, anxiety and fatigue.

It suggests lessons for the future, whenever we finally emerge for the current upheaval. For now, the findings of this report are a tribute to the resilience of the principals who shared their experiences with our researchers.

Michelle Green

Michelle Green
Chief Executive
Independent Schools Victoria

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Executive summary

Leading a school is demanding at the best of times, let alone through a pandemic. In 2020, nearly four million students enrolled in kindergarten to Year 12 in Australia experienced some interruption to their learning due to COVID-19. In particular, Victorian students experienced two strict lockdowns with significant periods spent learning from home. During such crises, the role of school principal becomes an unenviable and difficult proposition. The diverse challenges and competing needs that principals must juggle can also take a toll on their wellbeing and have a detrimental impact across school communities.

To explore how Independent school principals confronted the challenges of leading through the COVID-19 pandemic, Independent Schools Victoria conducted a joint empirical qualitative research study with Dr. Venesser Fernandes at the Faculty of Education, Monash University. The study is based on 42 in-depth interviews with a sample of Victorian Independent school principals conducted between October and December 2020.

We found that:

- Principals adapted their priorities and leadership approaches throughout the pandemic to navigate internal and external influences. Leadership styles generally shifted from an operational leadership approach to a more relational approach during the second lockdown.

- We found clear differences in the aspects of school leadership that principals prioritised, depending on their length of time in the role. Mid and experienced principals (over four years) were more likely to discuss school sustainability, teaching pedagogy and overall wellbeing compared to new principals. New principals (3 years or less) were more likely than mid to experienced principals to discuss operational and financial challenges and the value of community support and partnerships.

- The dominant leadership style adopted by principals was relational leadership. Eighty-three per cent of principals showed a strong inclination to become more people-centred by placing greater emphasis on building organic relationships, rather than focusing on just outcomes or solutions.

- Most principals found that people leadership was key in navigating the crisis successfully.

- Seventy-six per cent of principals suggested there is an opportunity to review aspects of current school models and pedagogical approaches. Several principals initiated plans to refine their current curriculum with an increased focus on digital technologies and developing new learning frameworks.

- Sixty-six per cent of principals reported experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety and fatigue during the pandemic. However, some were also able to see the silver lining and perceived the experience as an opportunity for the school to grow. They felt more competent and confident as they rose to the challenges thrown at them.

- Many principals may not have had adequate support or resources to cope with the mounting stress, caused by a significant workload and often exacerbated by professional isolation.

- Eighty-eight per cent of principals reported that it was necessary to shift their focus to mental health and wellbeing throughout the pandemic.

- Principals increasingly used research, data and technology to make evidence-based decisions during the crisis. Those who used data were keen to continue doing so due to the positive impact observed.

- Some principals have created emergency contingency plans to ensure their school remains financially sustainable.

- For many principals, the perception of their role shifted from being a leader of a school to a leader of their community.

- Principals learned that it is important to embrace uncertainty, be upfront and able to show vulnerability. By doing this, they were able to encourage a growth mindset and a safe space for experimentation and disruptive innovation for their school community.

- Some principals considered incorporating a hybrid learning approach to leverage the benefits observed from remote learning.

- To survive and thrive during such uncertain, complex and ambiguous times, principals performed a delicate balancing act of making decisions without fully knowing the consequences, while often dealing with financial pressures and questions about school sustainability.

They also had to manage people, relationships and communication with empathy and compassion. This invariably enabled new practices – grounded in adaptive and agile management and leadership principles – that encouraged experimentation and innovation.

While the challenges and opportunities stemming from the COVID-19 crisis varied from school to school, it was clear that principals were fighting apart, rather than alone. Together, they demonstrated newfound optimism through courage, hope and resilience. Their stories pave the way not only for school leaders, but educators, parents, students, researchers, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders to reimagine what quality education could look like in COVID-normal times and beyond.

Key recommendations

Based on our research findings, principals would be encouraged to consider:

- Embracing and maintaining flexibility to modify curricula and teaching delivery as required.

- Prioritising mental health and wellbeing concerns on an institutional level, recognising that these issues have wider implications and require a systemic response.

- Developing emergency contingency plans to ensure their school remains financially sustainable, now and in the long-term.

- Building relationships within and beyond their school communities and strengthening networks to increase collaboration.

- Conducting regular self-reflection to identify and address any physical, mental and emotional exhaustion to prevent burnout and champion self-care and self-reflection.

- Continuing to use research, data and technology to act on insights and be more agile in strategic decision making.

- Embracing uncertainty and showing vulnerability to gain trust and increase collaboration.

- Incorporating a blended or hybrid learning approach to leverage the benefits observed from remote learning.

Report findings at a glance

42

in-depth interviews with Victorian Independent school principals.

The dominant leadership style adopted by principals was relational leadership.

88%

reported a shift in focus to mental health and wellbeing.

83%

showed a strong inclination to become more people-centred during the crisis.

Mid and experienced principals (more than 4 years)

more likely to discuss school sustainability, teaching pedagogy and overall wellbeing.

New principals (3 years or less)

more likely to discuss operational and financial challenges and the value of community support and partnerships.

66%

experienced high levels of stress, anxiety and fatigue during the pandemic.

76%

suggested there is an opportunity to review aspects of current school models and pedagogical approaches.

Principals increasingly used research, data and technology to make evidence-based decisions.

Introduction
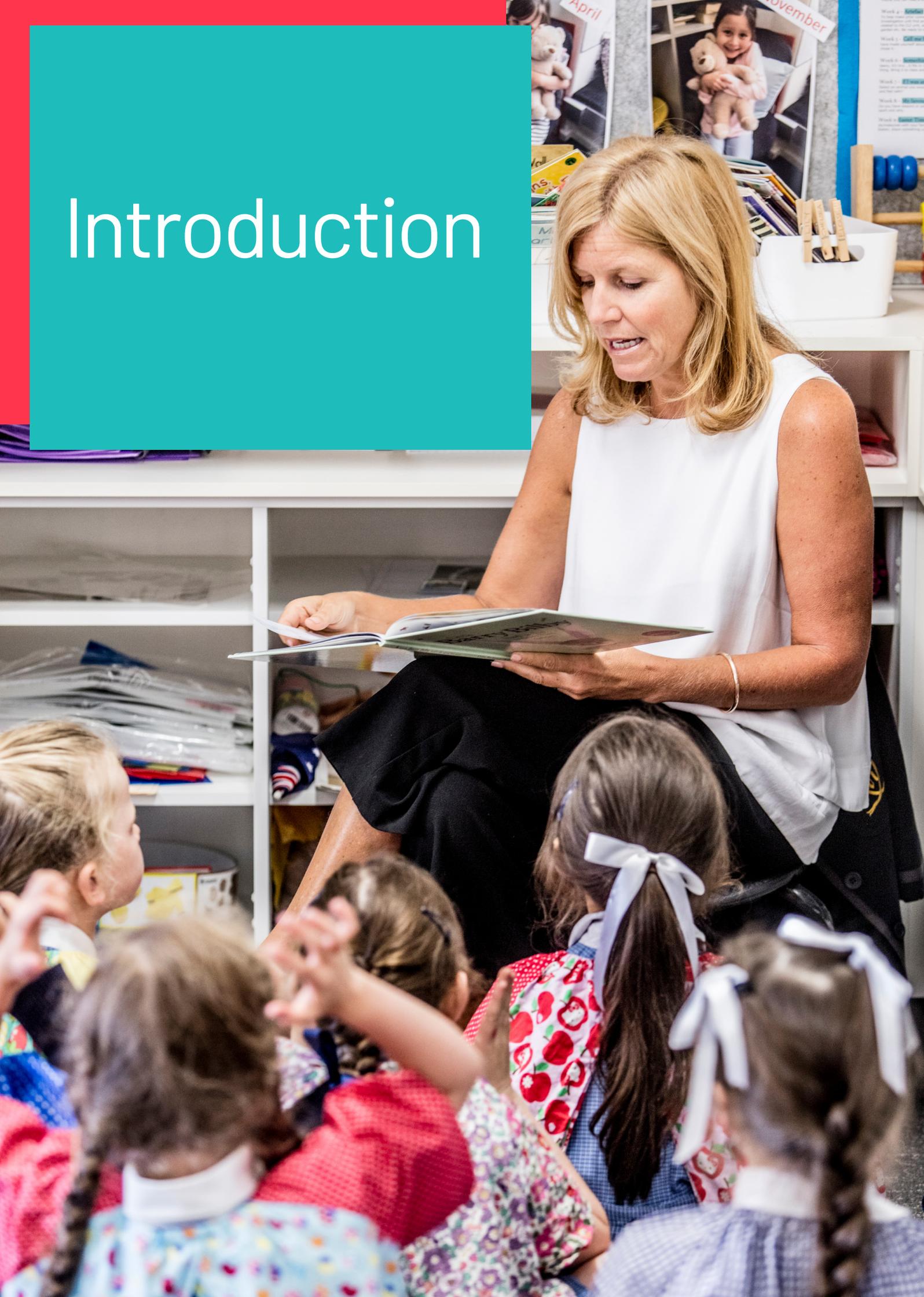
Education and change: 'Then' and 'now'

Technological development has significantly changed the way in which people work and communicate, particularly since the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, it's not until recently that the idea of digital nomadism in corporate and professional settings has became somewhat mainstream (Aroles, Granter & de Vaujany, 2020). Globally, there is a movement for businesses, communities and individuals to become more flexible and autonomous. We are also seeing workers progressively detached from a physical location, enabling them to perform organisational functions and collaborate anywhere, anytime (Ideland, 2021).

The education sector is no exception. We have seen a steady increase in virtual teaching and learning in recent years – from formally structured open university programs to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that are free for anyone to enrol. Some examples include courses offered by Khan Academy, Coursera and Udacity; socially networked learning via tools like wikis, weblogs, podcasts and YouTube; as well as social networking sites such as Facebook (Lourie, 2020; Siemens & Conole, 2011). Some of the world's top companies including Google, Microsoft, Amazon and Zoom have also tapped into educational services (Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020).

Nevertheless, schools are in a unique and important position to engage and equip students with relevant skills and competencies to navigate the future in this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. Many schools embrace a student-centred approach to support and encourage students to learn in a sustainable, authentic, active and purposeful way. In turn, this enables them to develop agency and ownership in learning; cognitive, metacognitive, interpersonal and emotional skills; and practical capacities to become agents of change (Tanner, 2012).

To encourage students to think as global citizens, schools are increasingly paying attention to local educational policy changes as well as international trends in the knowledge economy. For example, some schools are moving away from an examination-based curriculum to project-based learning to help students to think critically and deeply about real-world problems (Bughin et al., 2019; Ilori & Ajagunna, 2020). These significant changes suggest that schools may look to provide opportunities to empower educators through distributed leadership to transform education. As learning practices evolve, teachers will need more targeted professional learning that facilitates innovative pedagogies and evidence-based data to make decisions involving teaching and assessment (Barnes et al., 2018; Mahat et al., 2018).

The impact of COVID-19 on education

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the need for schools to embrace remote learning to sustain quality education. More than 1.5 billion enrolled students of all ages – approximately 90 per cent of the global student population – have been affected by the pandemic (UNESCO, 2020a; 2020b; UNICEF, 2020, cited by Bozkurt et al. 2020, p. 2). Although COVID-19 has been dubbed a 'once-in-a-century pandemic' (Gates, 2020), which presents unique complexities and challenges for teaching and learning, it will certainly not be the last crisis we face in our time. Therefore, schools will increasingly require agile leaders who are able 'to adapt to changing demands, and seek unique solutions in partnership with colleagues and peers' (Breakspear et al., 2017, p. v), as they become accustomed to a 'new COVID-normal'.

While adaptability, flexibility and agility are often used synonymously to describe how people respond to change and uncertainty, some scholars argue that they are different concepts. For example, Conboy (2009) points out that adaptability is predominately reactive. In other words, when 'the world "outside" of education changes, so must the world "inside" of education, with much of the responsibility for leading the changes resting with school leaders (Timperley et al., 2020, p. 1, cited by Elliott & Hollingsworth, 2020).'

Agility, on the other hand, signifies a two-way process, where one can also influence and implement radical change (Conboy, 2009). While agility in education is not new, it is especially relevant in times of crisis. This is because school leaders are prompted to scramble for resources and act quickly without fully knowing the consequences of their decisions. As education systems around the globe are continually forced to engage in emergency remote education, we are witnessing a shift from chalk-and-talk teacher-centred learning to student-focused and collaborative processes (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

In a similar vein, Gardner-McTaggart (2020) highlights the need for educational management, administration and leadership to reposition from its current form based on dominated knowledge. For instance, the pandemic prompted schools to be more vigilant about practices like hygiene at an organisational level. By dealing with such present-future needs, schools are encouraged to think and work collectively to reinforce sustainable and common-sense goals.

This underpins a power shift some scholars have pointed out that concerns educational leadership at an institutional level: emphasising of communality rather than individuality (Sergiovanni, 2005). Despite various leadership styles, personal traits and competencies – as well as philosophies and values – being commonly used as precursors to successful leadership in education, Sergiovanni (2005) argues that 'the heartbeat of leadership is a relationship, not a person or process' (p. 53). It is therefore important to consider and contextualise relevant relational, environmental and situational factors to understand how they can influence leadership practices in education. For example, in Australia alone, nearly four million kindergarten to Year 12 students are enrolled in schools (ABS, 2019). While every principal, teacher and student experienced some level of interruption in 2020, impacts emerging from the pandemic varied among schools in different states.

> "The heartbeat of leadership is a relationship, not a person or process."
>
> *Sergiovanni (2005)*

What is relational leadership?

The dominant leadership style adopted by principals throughout the pandemic was relational leadership. The diagram below shows the elements of this leadership model.

Context
Understanding key issues and being able to think strategically about how to respond

Change
Understanding and working effectively with the dynamics of change

Complexity
Having the skills to survive and thrive in situations of low certainty and low agreement

Connected
The ability to understand actors in the wider political landscape and to engage and build effective relationships with new kinds of internal and external partners

Adapted from: Bond, D., Dent, F., Gitsham, M., & Culpin, V. (2010). A perspective on leadership: Towards a relational leadership framework. *The Ashridge Journal, 4, p.2.*

The situation that Victorian principals faced was unique as the lockdown restrictions in Victoria were more strict and prolonged than other states in Australia. The first lockdown lasted from March-May and the second lockdown from July-October 2020. In total, Victorians were in hard lockdown for 176 days in 2020, compared to 56 days of less stringent rules for non-Victorians. In addition to the night curfew (8pm to 5am) imposed across the metropolitan area, Melburnians were required to stay home unless shopping for essential goods and services; undertaking work or study that could not be done from home; seeking or giving care; or exercising (for a maximum of one hour) within a 5km radius (Westrupp et al., 2021).

While restrictions were slightly less severe for regional areas, Victorian students in general spent significant time learning from home compared to other states in Australia.

Consequently, operational guidelines across Victorian Independent schools were uncertain and many constraints ebbed and flowed during the crisis. These guidelines were often unclear, contradictory and came from multiple government departments within both the Federal and State Governments, which placed further strain on school principals. For example, in April 2020, Victorian Independent schools were required to decide whether to re-open their school to receive an early funding payment from the Federal Government or to continue with remote learning as advised by the Victorian Chief Health Officer (ABC, 2020). This was a difficult choice for many principals to make.

There is some research providing insights on how COVID-19 may have impacted education in Australia in general (e.g., see Drane, Vernon & O'Shea, 2020; Morris et al., 2020; Scull et al., 2020). In June 2021, ISV released a report on how school communities adjusted to remote learning during COVID-19 based on its LEAD School Effectiveness Surveys. Other than this, studies on the experience of Independent schools in Victoria are scant. While existing studies capture the experiences of teachers and students, narratives from school leaders remain unexplored. This study was conducted to address these gaps, primarily to understand the experience of principals in Victorian Independent schools during the crisis.

Research background

The role of a principal is pivotal in maintaining education continuity and growth, especially in a time of crisis. As Gouëdard et. al. (2020) suggests, 'principals are key, as they are at the heart of the school-level strategies to respond to emergencies' (p. 13).

Against this backdrop, Independent Schools Victoria (ISV) explored the role of school leadership during the pandemic, how principals felt, what they learned and the challenges they encountered. The initial interviews, undertaken by ISV staff during the first Victorian COVID-19 lockdown in April 2020, provided a landscape view of Independent schools and the challenges they were facing in relation to education, finances, health and wellbeing.

Our initial research found that principals took the opportunity to review and redesign current practices during the pandemic. Some of the opportunities identified were collaboration and communication (among staff, parents and other schools), changes in the traditional timetable, the use of technology, and the upskilling and reskilling of teachers to stay relevant in the new means of curriculum delivery.

Principalship is an emergent profession. As noted by one principal during the interview: 'it is like driving a car while still building it!' Nevertheless, the significant challenges facing school leaders throughout the COVID-19 crisis provided an opportunity to investigate how principals at Victorian Independent schools tackled these issues and what we can learn from their experience.

In collaboration with Dr. Venesser Fernandes from the Faculty of Education at Monash University, this research aims to explore the experiences of principals of Victorian Independent schools who led their school through the pandemic. Specifically, this study aims to:

- Investigate how principals experienced the COVID-19 lockdowns by expanding on the conversations and insights gained in the initial interview,

- Improve understanding of how principals strategically led their school during the pandemic to identify key elements of an agile leadership and school,

- Explore principals' reflections of how this experience might change their school and the post-pandemic educational agenda in schools.

Research questions

The overarching research question that guided this study has been: 'What was the experience of principals in Independent schools during the COVID-19 crisis?'. This was explored using the following sub-research questions:

- How did principals describe the experience leading their school in both lockdowns?

- What was the impact of this experience in their leadership and decision making?

- Which elements and practices helped principals in enabling an agile and adaptive school?

- How did principals describe their school and education in post-pandemic times?

Research design and methodology

We conducted two research components for the current study. The first component, project planning and establishment, was designed to develop a deeper understanding of the initial research conducted during April–May in 2020 and to review existing material relevant to this study. To achieve this, informal interviews were conducted with interviewers involved in the initial research and relevant ISV staff who have contact with principals and/or expertise in school leadership. Additionally, we conducted a literature scan of current research to ground the study. This ensured that collective experience and data was used to inform the development of the discussion guide, interview questions and supplementary analysis.

The second, and core component, was qualitative research among principals in Independent schools. The qualitative approach allowed for a detailed and flexible examination of people's perceptions and decision making. As the objectives were explorative in nature, in-depth interviews were chosen as a medium to receive elaborative feedback and deeper understanding of opinions. The richness of this data could not be obtained through a quantitative design.

The target audience for this study were principals of Independent schools in Victoria, specifically, those already interviewed in the initial research during the first lockdown in early 2020. Interviewers in the initial research were mainly responsible for conducting interviews in this study. Interviewers used a semi-structured discussion guide to conduct the interviews. This enabled a less rigid and conversational interview which allowed interviewers to probe various scenarios.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. In addition, an analysis framework was used as a guide for interviewers to note their impressions of the key themes, patterns, quotes and points of interest during the discussion. The process of analysis began the moment the discussion ended. This initial analysis approach ensured that qualitative data was interrogated in a thorough yet timely manner.

Participant demographic

Using a sample of 90 principals interviewed during the first lockdown, which was broadly representative of all Victorian Independent schools, a total of 42 principals participated in this research. The interviews took place in November–December 2020, averaging 45 minutes in length. The following diagrams provide a breakdown of principals' school demographic and experience.

School location

21%

79%

■ Metro. n=33
■ Regional. n=9

School type

7%

21%

5%

67%

■ Combined. n=28
■ Primary. n=3
■ Secondary. n=9
■ Special. n=2
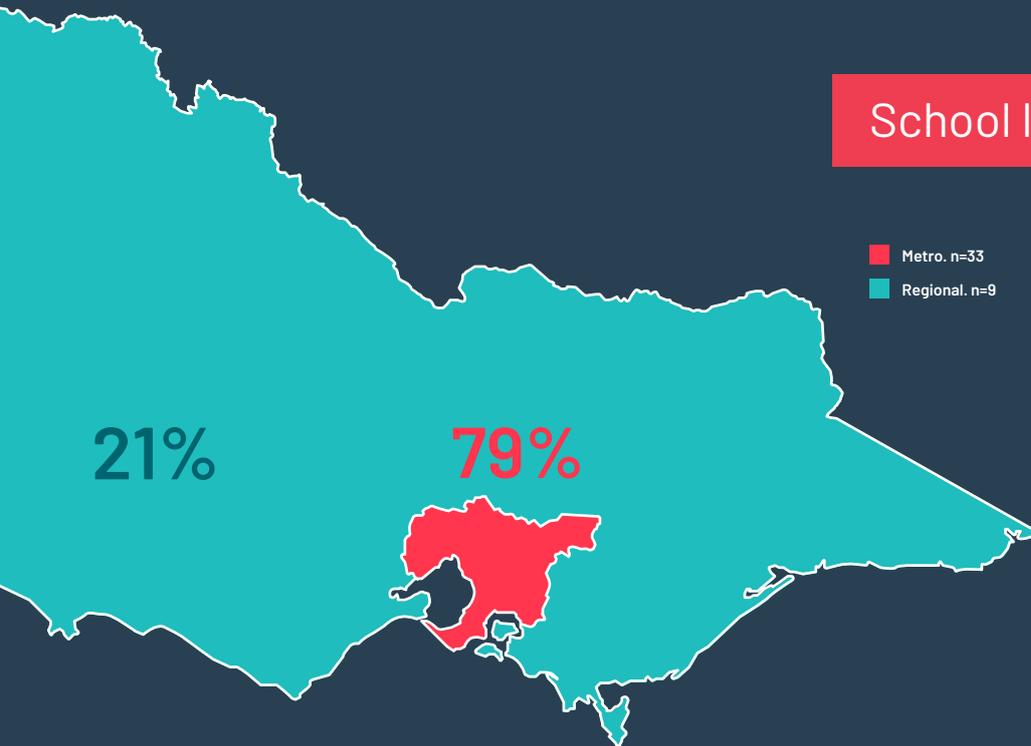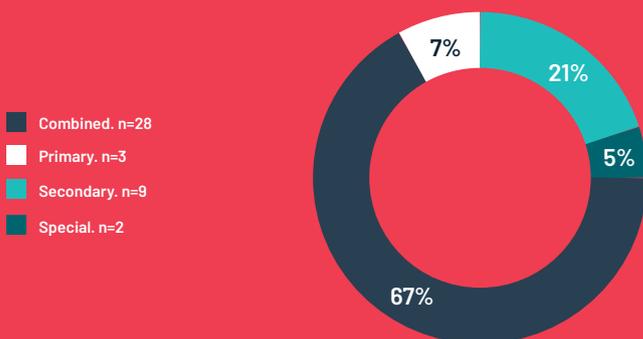
Years of experience as principal

34%

32%

34%

■ New (3 years or less). n=14
■ Mid experience (4-7 years). n=14
■ Experienced (8 years or more). n=13
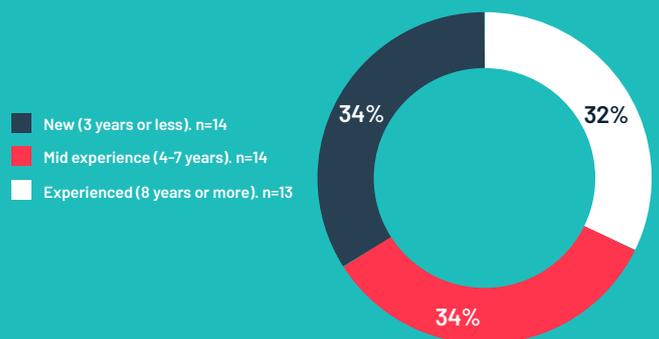
*One participant interviewed was an Assistant Principal

Analysis approach

The data investigation involved thematic analysis to identify emerging themes. We implemented the following coding approaches when assessing the notes within interviewer's analysis framework, recordings and transcripts:

- Descriptive coding: first cycle method of coding that involved reading through qualitative data, and coding passages according to topic

- In-vivo coding: refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record, using participants' own words, and weaving their language into the descriptive codes.

Multiple iterations of coding were carried out using a narrative inquiry framework, which is the process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling. As Clandinin (2006) points out, 'arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry are inspired by a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives.'

In this study, the power of storytelling was used to unpack principals' experience, challenges and leadership during the crisis. We looked at the three dimensions of narrative inquiry (temporal, sociality and place dimensions) to understand principals' experience. The narrative analysis framework shown in Figure 1 (p.18) provided a roadmap to develop semi-structured interview questions that were central and relevant to our research.

The narrative inquiry approach allowed us to explore how a principal's experience is seen, shaped and reported. It enabled us to include narrative elements, develop plots based on chronological patterns and divide plots based on internal and external circumstances and challenges.

Figure 1: Narrative analysis framework

Lived experience

(Every experience has a past, present and future and is simultaneously personal and social), influenced by exernal context

Sociality (interaction)

Personal conditions
(e.g. "feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions")

Social conditions
(e.g. "cultural, social, institutional and linguistic narratives", researcher (interviewer) and participant relationship, ISV's role, collaboration between schools etc.)

Place (contextualised realities)

Specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place where the inquiry and events take place.

Internal (e.g. organisational) and external contexts (e.g. State and Federal influence, unforeseen circumstances etc.)

Temporality (continuity in time)

Past
(reflection)

March–May 2020

Start of
the pandemic
(First lockdown, first wave)

Present
(experience)

July–October 2020

During the pandemic
and the new "normal"
(Second lockdown, second wave)

Future
(outlook and expectations)

Past pandemic
(Recovery phase)

(Source: Image adapted from Clandinin, 2006)

Results and discussion
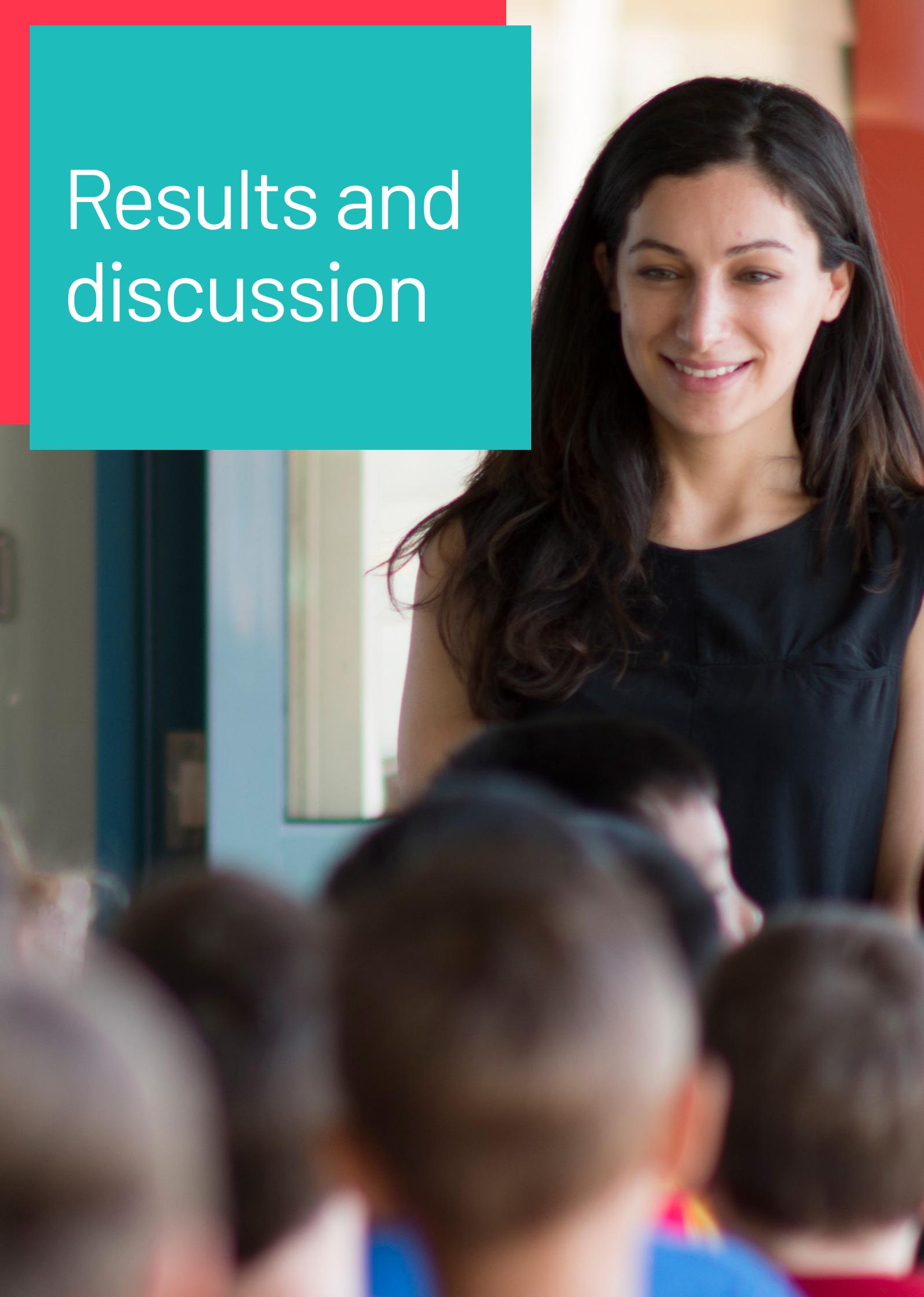
Leading school communities through crisis: an overview

Principals' challenges and priorities started with an initial 'COVID crisis' period beginning in March 2020. This shifted to a period of 'COVID normal' that all schools reached sometime between the end of the second lockdown in October and the return to school for all students around November/December. Figure 2 below portrays the number of mentions by theme during lockdown one, lockdown two and COVID-normal. The gradient reflects the distribution of data, with a red shade representing a higher number of mentions across interviews.

Figure 2: Heatmap of key themes by time stages
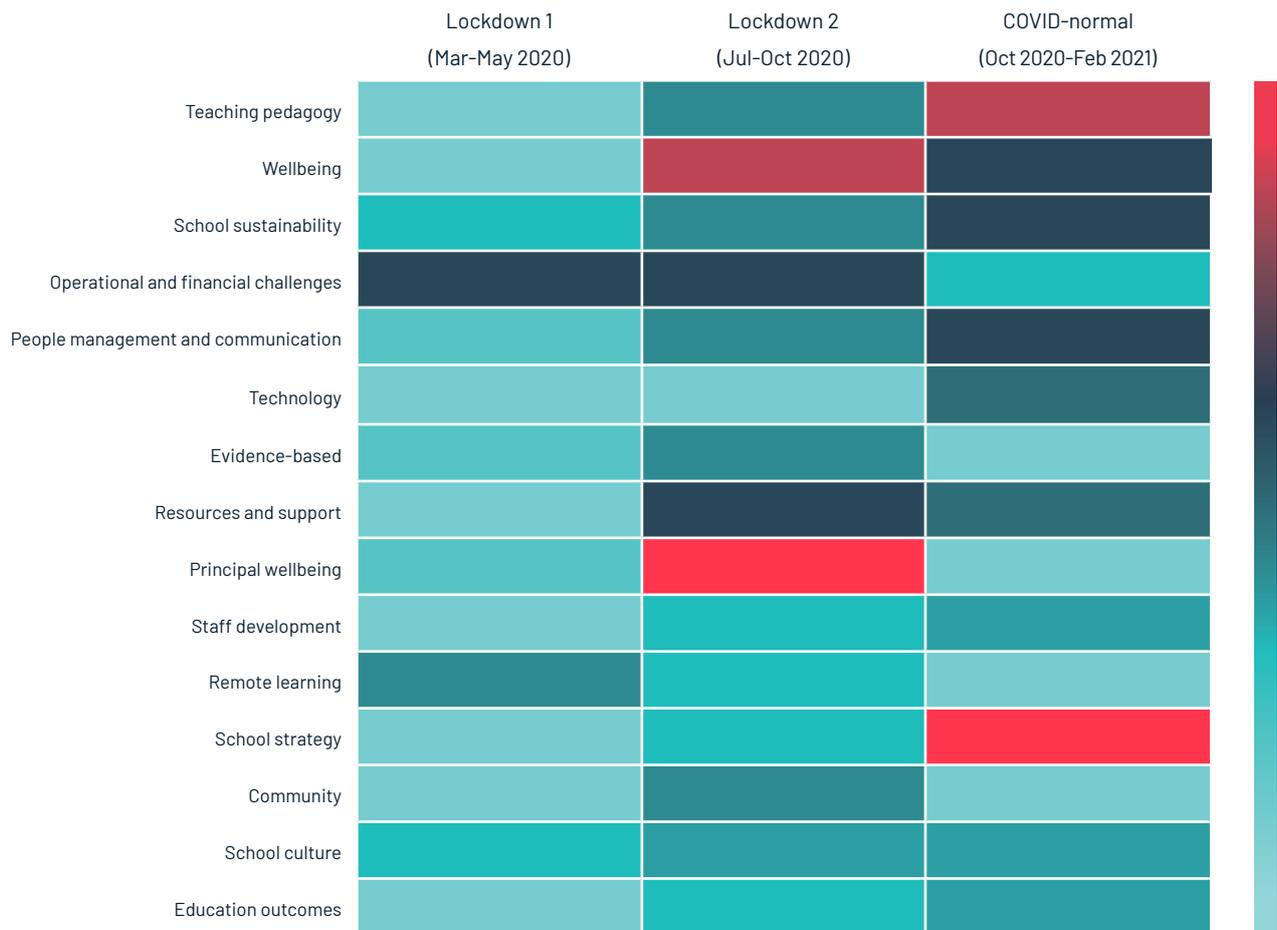
	Lockdown 1 (Mar-May 2020)	Lockdown 2 (Jul-Oct 2020)	COVID-normal (Oct 2020-Feb 2021)
Teaching pedagogy			
Wellbeing			
School sustainability			
Operational and financial challenges			
People management and communication			
Technology			
Evidence-based			
Resources and support			
Principal wellbeing			
Staff development			
Remote learning			
School strategy			
Community			
School culture			
Education outcomes			

(Source: Coded main themes by time stages, n=42)
Note: Red and darker shades represent higher number of mentions.

In summary, during lockdown one, principals prioritised operational and financial challenges and setting up remote learning. The priority then shifted towards wellbeing, using evidence-based data and focusing on community during lockdown two. Towards the end of 2020, many principals aspired to resume strategic planning once the school was back on-site. Most schools were able to conduct reflective considerations of what worked well and what did not during remote learning, and to leverage the benefits that emerged.

For example, one of the key considerations was to explore how a hybrid learning approach can further improve student learning and experience. In summary, school responses to the pandemic have been extraordinary as they shifted from 'COVID-crisis' to 'COVID-normal'.

Additionally, principals' focus differed by their years of experience. As depicted in Figure 3 (p.22), we found clear differences in what principals prioritised depending on their length of time in the role.

Figure 3 shows that new principals (3 years or less) were more likely than mid to experienced principals to discuss operational and financial challenges. They discussed the value of community support and partnerships and were keen to revisit their school strategy once restrictions were lifted. They were also more likely to highlight their own mental health and wellbeing than those who had more experience.

Principals early in their career were not only faced with operational and strategic issues, but the added pressure of building relationships and conceptualising their role and duties as a 'principal'. On the other hand, principals with more experience who already had established relationships were able to shift their attention to creative and innovative endeavours to improve teaching and learning. For example, mid and experienced principals (over 4 years) were more likely to discuss school sustainability, teaching pedagogy and overall wellbeing compared to new principals.

Figure 3: Heatmap of themes by principal's experience

	New (3 years or less)	Mid experience (4-7 years)	Experienced (8 years or more)
Teaching pedagogy			
Wellbeing			
School sustainability			
Operational and financial challenges			
People management and communication			
Technology			
Evidence-based			
Resources and support			
Principal wellbeing			
Staff development			
Remote learning			
School strategy			
Community			
School culture			
Education outcomes			

(Source: Coded main themes by principal's years of experience, n=42)

Note: Red and darker shades represent higher number of mentions.

The findings from our research also suggest that principals adapted their priorities and leadership approaches throughout the pandemic to navigate internal and external influences. This can be seen in Figure 4, where most principals adopted a transactional leadership approach as schools quickly moved into a remote learning model during the start of the COVID crisis. Principals also generally focused on contingency planning during the first lockdown to mitigate potential risks. During that time, principals reported being highly exhausted and anxious, but determined to portray calmness and lead from the front.

As demonstrated in Figure 4, principals' leadership styles generally shifted from an operational leadership approach to a more relational approach during the second lockdown. As the crisis wore on, principals reported becoming more empathetic as they were mindful that the pandemic has taken a toll on their staff and students' mental health and wellbeing. As they worked through the crisis, most principals adopted a leadership approach that can be variously described as values-based, collaborative, transparent and innovative.

Figure 4: Heatmap of leadership approaches by time stages
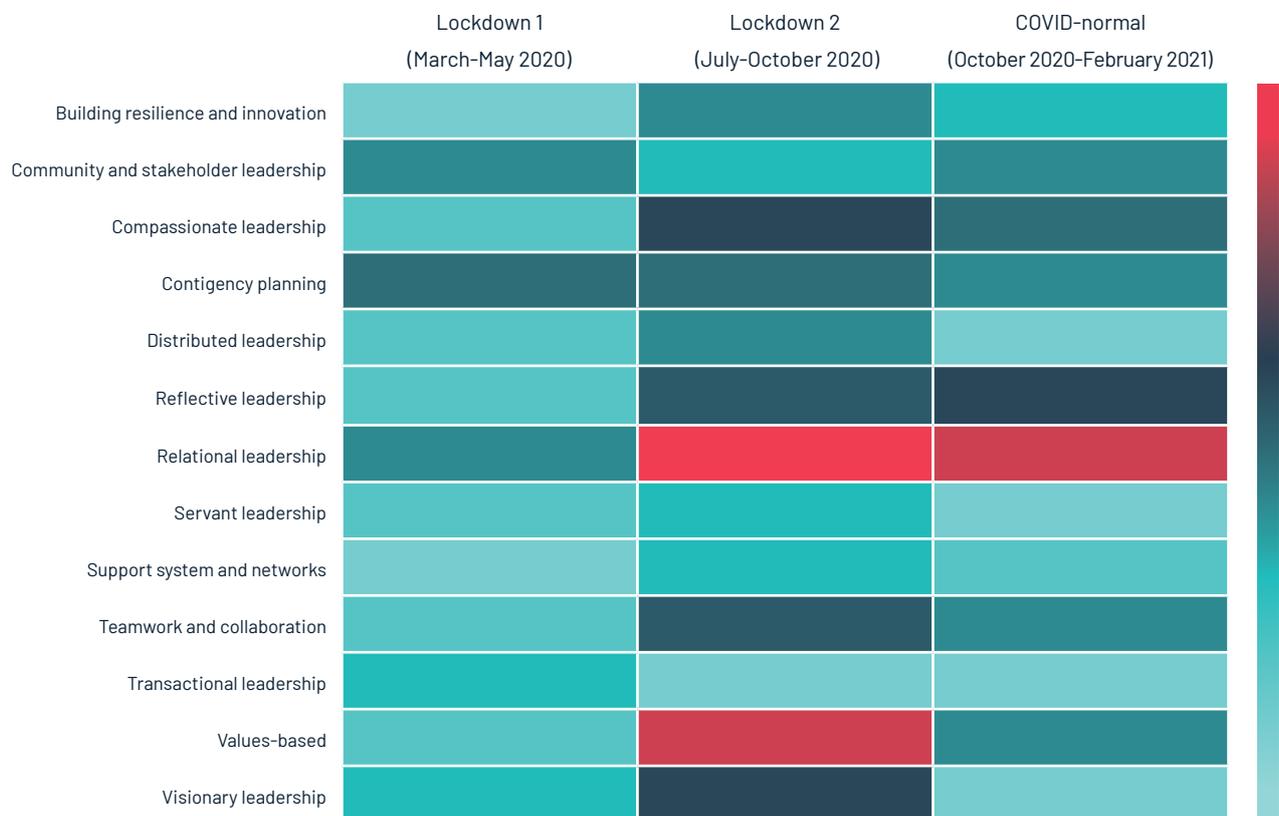
(Source: Coded main themes by time stages, n=42)

Note: Red and darker shades represent higher number of mentions.

> *"Principals' leadership styles generally shifted from an operational leadership approach to a more relational approach during the second lockdown. As the crisis wore on, principals reported becoming more empathetic as they were mindful that the pandemic has taken a toll on their staff and students' mental health and wellbeing."*

When asked what leadership approach they would prioritise in a COVID normal environment, most noted that 'people leadership' is key. While many principals already acknowledged this point, the effect of the pandemic heightened this reality in schools and refocused many principals on the importance of people leadership. They were keen to maintain the communication structures and strong bonds they had strengthened among their staff and stakeholders during the pandemic. They also intend to actively incorporate stakeholders' voices in their school's strategic decision making.

For many principals, the perception of their role shifted from being a leader of a school to a leader of their community.

"We certainly pushed a few things to the sidelines and just focused as much as we could on teaching and learning, and building connections with the community."

Most principals increased their focus on understanding community needs and involving them in the actual planning process. Principals also recognised the importance of building and maintaining strong relationships within the school community and beyond. Some schools continued to conduct cultural festivals in COVID-safe environments to further establish the school's presence in the community, maintain tradition and provide a social and emotional uplift for students and staff.

Principals felt they had an accountability in the wider community to ensure students receive a quality education and develop a civic responsibility despite the pandemic. For example, one principal mentioned that a key element of leading through a crisis was having a strong community bond, which would ultimately support a school to continue to grow.

Other principals noted that having to adapt to changing conditions during the pandemic also influenced their perception and leadership practices. For example, the majority reported growing more confident in leading their school communities. At the same time, their expectations of themselves became arguably more realistic and reasonable upon recognising their individual strengths and constraints. As a result, some principals experienced a high level of personal growth, reporting that they became more empathetic, more conscious of their leadership style and more accepting of things outside of their control.

"...we just haven't got where I'd hoped we might be with that, but that's fine."

"...it's been an insane year, but also, in terms of personal growth and professional growth, the most valuable."

Leadership styles throughout the pandemic

Given that leadership is a fluid construct, principals had to adopt different leadership styles throughout the pandemic. While every principal's experience was unique, several distinctive styles were evident.

Figure 6 below shows the percentage of principals who identified with each leadership style during the pandemic.

The dominant style adopted by principals was relational leadership. This style of leading through a crisis stood out, with 83 per cent of principals becoming more people-centred and placing greater emphasis on building organic relationships, rather than focusing on just outcomes or solutions.

"I think my leadership was evolving anyway, but this has probably accelerated a few things. I've tried to have a more humanistic approach to my leadership in the last few years and that certainly accelerated when I came here."

As a result, principals were not only able to build stronger connections with staff, students and parents, but also with their professional networks and local communities. Put simply, when leading through a crisis, we found that relational leadership trumps transactional leadership.

Figure 6: Leadership styles identified in the current study

% of principals who adopted each leadership style

Leadership style	%
Relational leadership	83%
Values-based leadership	64%
Compassionate leadership	64%
Visionary leadership	26%
Distributive leadership	19%
Reflective leadership	17%
Servant leadership	7%
Transactional leadership	5%
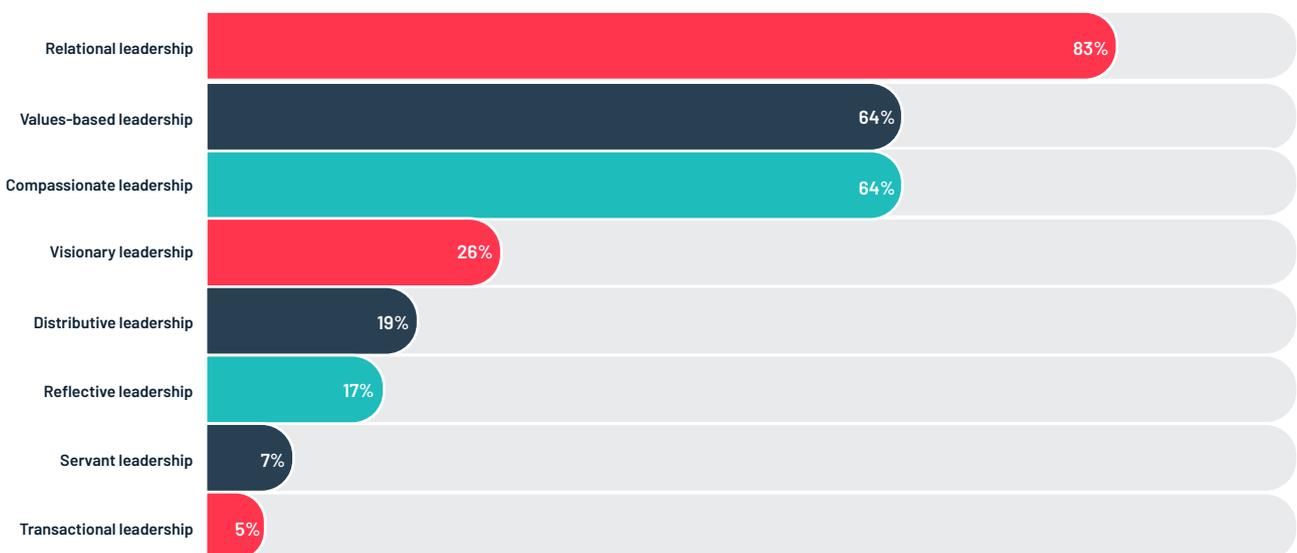
In general, principals also showed increased empathy and understanding throughout their experience leading through the COVID-19 crisis. This type of compassionate leadership that was evident in some, contrasted with others who adopted a more servant leadership style, noting that they had a greater capacity to see things from others' perspectives. They were also more willing to listen and empathise, or just 'be there' to serve those in need.

"And as we're moving forward with COVID, the thing that I've put into leadership is just making sure, and doing much more checking in on staff, on how staff are actually going in their personal life. Because that has a strong effect on their professional life."

"Listening to people, listening to hear where they were unhappy, unsettled, concerned...my priority is about making people feel supported."

We also found that many principals adopted a reflective leadership approach, where they took the time to reflect and critique their own leadership style to improve how they lead their school. Other principals were more motivated by their perceived values and purposes and practised valued-based leadership.

"I don't think that my role ever finished. It didn't finish till after ten o'clock at night, when I finally went to sleep it would finish. And then when I woke up it started all over again and including on the weekend."

"The role of a principal is to offer whatever it is that a community needs at a particular time. Sometimes it takes a hammer, sometimes it takes a rose. While the pandemic has changed some of the things I have done, the actions, but not actually what I see as my role."

In this light, principals assumed a great responsibility to lead and were consciously aware of their 'duty of care' when making decisions. Often, they are influenced by the school's philosophy, ethos and traditions when making decisions about the values underpinning their leadership.

Our study also found that some principals are driven by a firm vision, demonstrating visionary leadership. As one principal described her state of action being equivalent to steering a ship: 'The ship needs to be firm. [The] steering wheel, you've got to hold it in your hands.' By not losing sight of the big picture, these leaders demonstrated resilience despite changing circumstances.

Another leadership style we uncovered related to distributive leadership. We witnessed a shift in authority where principals increasingly opted to share responsibilities with others by empowering and involving their staff in higher level problem-solving and decision-making.

As mentioned on p.18, the narrative inquiry framework allowed us to examine principals' experience through the continuity in time.

Lockdown one:
the spread of COVID-19

Planning, decision-making and navigating through uncertainty

Principals in general found it extremely difficult to run their school, likening it to navigating in the dark at times. This was especially the case during the first lockdown, where they had little information about decisions and guidelines from government. As a result, principals needed to make decisions quickly without fully knowing the consequences. This was something that initially sat uncomfortably with many principals.

For instance, this was seen in the case of school closures during mandatory lockdowns. To anticipate the needs of their students and communities, principals promptly decided to shift to online learning prior to the official announcement of state-wide school closures due to rising concerns from their community. Others reported that they were 'literally making decisions hour by hour' as new information kept unfolding. Given that the state of Victoria went into lockdowns within short notice, that had no foreseeable end date, it was incredibly challenging for principals to plan their school operations.

"I had to take a lot of shots in the dark, and make mistakes, and see whether it worked for our school community."

Moreover, around 31 per cent of principals expressed frustration in dealing with conflicting information from the State and Federal Governments. Principals also noted a lack of clarity from various government and statutory organisations. On the other hand, many principals saw Independent Schools Victoria (ISV) as an invaluable resource. For example, some were grateful to receive guidance from ISV's daily email updates; others praised individuals from ISV who provided timely advice, mentorship and help with funding applications.

While most principals mentioned that their School Board and communities were supportive and understanding, having to maintain regular contact with multiple iterations of communication back and forth was incredibly wearying, especially when stakeholders demanded that principals provide answers straightaway.

"It also demonstrates to me that we have a Board that works closely with myself and the executive team when they need to, and that our values are aligned. And I think that's really come through this year."

While no one anticipated the severity of the COVID-19 crisis, more than one-third of principals (36 per cent) said they were aware that some basic contingency planning and forecasting may help to offset a potential crisis. Therefore, some principals indicated that they will be incorporating lessons from the pandemic into developing strategic plans in their short to mid-term future. For example, some principals recognised that they need to consider how to better prepare for future lockdowns to help their schools navigate challenges like wellbeing support, improving their school's ICT infrastructure, developing a consistent approach to messaging, as well as looking at ways to reskill, upskill or hire quality teachers in the COVID-normal future.

During our interviews, some principals commented on how their past professional experience in dealing with crises and other knowledge from previous workplaces may have helped them to manage the pandemic. Many principals felt that lessons from the first lockdown enabled them to become more confident in dealing with the situation the second time around.

"I think the second lockdown for us was easier, because we already had a template. We already had the communication strategy…We worked out that we were overloading the kids in the first lockdown compared to the second time around. People had to really decide what was important for the kids to take away. So, the structure of the day changed."

Approximately 48 per cent of principals mentioned that they increasingly used evidence-based research and data to enable a more holistic understanding to inform decisions during the initial stages of the pandemic when planning was difficult. Types of data collected for this purpose included self-reflection evaluations, documenting new processes, observational data in the classroom, student engagement data, attendance data, as well as surveys to grasp how schools could better support their communities.

"I think the other experience and opportunity has been for us as educators to see the role of flexibility in learning. So, student feedback was very much about their ownership and their choice and voice in learning, and how they chose to work."

Some principals reported that their schools conducted multiple surveys among their stakeholders to ensure all voices were heard. For example, one principal revealed that his school tailored their current wellbeing program based on data findings on students' mental health. In these cases, developing data literacy capabilities across staff becomes important. To ensure validity and reliability of data, a fully integrated and accessible data system would further enable staff across levels to make strategic decisions to create and refine teaching and learning that reflect students' needs in real-time.

As we can see, principals had to navigate through a great deal of uncertainty during lockdown one. They also had to juggle day-to-day operational challenges to keep their school running.

Lockdown two:
Confronting emerging tensions

Dealing with financial pressure and ensuring school sustainability

Principals said they faced immense financial pressure during the pandemic. Economic factors, such as parents' loss of income and loss of enrolments (particularly international students), placed financial stress on some schools. For almost all schools, COVID-19 created increased operating costs through new IT expenditure, staff development, and other short-term or ongoing related expenses such as personal protective equipment, cleaning services and safety equipment. These fiscal burdens were especially tough for schools already facing financial pressure before the pandemic.

As fees are the predominate source of income for most Independent schools, some principals offered fee discounts to families during early days of the pandemic to alleviate pressure on the school community. Although offering fee relief to families (who were themselves uncertain of the ongoing impact of the crisis) assisted in keeping students at the school, this placed even more pressure on principals. For instance, many principals worried about constraints on their ability to keep their workforce at full capacity. Such juggling acts between operational realities and keeping the school community together were common and placed great stress on many principals, especially at the height of the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic.

Some schools continue to experience or anticipate long-term financial impact due to the destabilisation of student enrolments attributed in some cases to the pandemic.

> "There was probably a concern on how, with such a small school, that any impact on enrolments could be devastating for us really."

Schools with international students were still facing border closures and uncertainty as to whether their students would be able to return to Australia in early 2021. One school lost 30 international students and had to ask staff to take voluntary redundancies to resolve their financial state. Some principals also had to face overwhelming pressure from parents who were frustrated by the system.

While some principals will immediately assess their school's finances to ensure they can allocate resources for students and their families who are financially impacted by the pandemic, they also understand that this will be an ongoing process for the next few years.

> "We're not sure how the economy is going to go, and we're an Independent, fee-paying school. So, that puts strain on families and also whether we're even an option [for some parents] anymore."

Principals acknowledged that there might be lasting impacts from the pandemic, recognising that they will not feel the full financial fallout of the crisis immediately. Sixty-four per cent of principals outlined concerns around the sustainability of their school. For instance, some principals had to engage in ongoing discussions with staff to assure them of their job security.

Despite the uncertainty around finances, many principals had a positive outlook on future enrolments. In fact, the most recent Census data revealed that Independent school enrolments as a whole have increased marginally from the previous year despite the pandemic. One principal highlighted the need to balance cost efficiency and education quality. To maintain financial sustainability, principals may need to find new alternatives to reduce costs without compromising quality.

In response, some principals started to look for new markets to overcome the loss of international students. In these schools, a new marketing approach to raise the school's reputation and target new audiences was deemed necessary. As seen from schools that reported an increase in enrolments during the pandemic, principals suggest positive reputation among communities and the perception of value for money based on school fees may have contributed to their growth.

"The word is spreading. It's taken three or four years, but the word is spreading that what we offer is a very viable alternative for those students who don't fit mainstream."

While schools are affected in different ways, principals interviewed suggested that they are not struggling alone. Some principals mentioned how they valued opportunities to collaborate with other schools to form professional networks and support each other during the pandemic.

"We may be competitor schools, but that doesn't matter right now; we're here to just get through this. There was a huge amount of sharing in the earlier days...that was great, just seeing various networks all come together and share and support one another."

"One of the biggest things for me was great collaboration between leaders. So, a number of principals, we got together quite regularly, not physically, but by phone or through Skype, and communicated what we were doing and why we were doing it. And it gave us a chance to reflect, not necessarily change anything that we already made decisions, but it definitely said, "Oh, okay, I've not thought about that."

Some principals also recognised the benefits of having participated in programs facilitated by ISV like Leading Learning that Matters (LLtM), which continued to provide connections with other schools and allowed them to work together and share resources. In general, principals appreciated support from their networks during the pandemic.

Managing people, relationships and communication

Principals from our interviews revealed that one effective way to build trust and maintain connection among school communities during remote learning was through regular and transparent communication.

"The pandemic has accelerated my practical leadership of the community, and the necessity to have clarity of communication to all of our families. We put all messages there so what they would see, they would see the executive principal speaking and giving some clear messaging about how the school was responding, with honesty, and saying there are still some uncertainties, but we will communicate to you as they come out."

Almost half of the principals interviewed (43 per cent) reported that they felt supported, helpful and understanding after engaging with stakeholders. Principals were able to maintain connection with their school communities via virtual meetings, emails and phone calls. This suggests there was an increased level of confidence in using technology to communicate, especially during the second lockdown.

While a handful of principals noted that some staff struggled to change and were not as flexible due to the 'very static culture' of the school, most agreed that their staff became more adaptable and comfortable in responding to change. In general, there was a high level of commitment, as well as trust, collaboration and collegiality among staff at most schools and a commitment to working together to continue the task of providing a quality education to students. Almost half (48 per cent) of the principals interviewed had a positive reflection of their school's teamwork and collaboration throughout the pandemic.

"Our staff have been there 100% of the time. And, yes, they've been stressed. And yes, they're exhausted, but they're there for each other. And the feeling of the team is just huge."

Staff collaborated more frequently through formal and self-organised groups during the lockdowns. For example, one school started a 'buddy system' on Facebook where staff members regularly 'check-in' with one another to ensure everyone is coping okay. Other schools created learning community groups from different campuses or year levels to encourage teachers to come together to share their learning, brainstorm and create pilot projects or experiment with new teaching. Principals also found that teachers were taking more ownership of teaching as they assumed responsibility to work out effective ways to teach remotely, individually and as a team.

"I've seen more professional learning, more adaptive learning, more creative thinking ... than I've ever seen."

"One of our staff, who's been here a number of years, has really stepped up in terms of leading her colleagues in some of the innovations around teaching online."

Some principals spoke of the need to implement structural changes at their school, such as redesigning leadership and management roles, to better support staff with the shift toward digital education. Other schools restructured their workforce to place staff into temporary positions to counter pressing needs to cope with the shift into new areas of organisation driven by the pandemic, such as remote teaching. Overall, principals who had to re-model their workforce indicated that getting the 'right people' is vital to address current and potential gaps in their schools, not only during the COIVD-19 pandemic but in response to the increasing anticipation of a hybrid learning future. But finding quality teachers can be difficult. Employing new staff members was often challenging for schools to carry out the recruitment process online.

Despite the challenges around moving to online learning and communicating change across the school community, some principals did manage to capitalise on opportunities created by COVID-19. The shift toward virtual professional learning presented opportunities for the whole staff at a school to obtain new skills that are aligned with the school's values and goals at a reduced cost. Principals recognised that online attendance for professional development and events like webinars and conferences are likely to increase. In fact, principals found that teachers participated in more professional development courses during the pandemic than they did pre-pandemic. This momentum of reskilling and upskilling among teachers is likely a result of surging global online courses, with school culture becoming more participatory and principals' ongoing commitment to provide quality education.

Most principals were pleased by their staff's desire and confidence to grow professionally and adapt to changes. In this sense, staff 'buy-in' emerges as an important enabler to transform a school's culture. Therefore, maintaining job satisfaction and providing ample opportunities for professional growth for existing staff are equally important as recruiting new and quality team members to create an effective and sustainable workforce.

The lockdowns also illustrated that it was feasible for schools to adopt more flexible work arrangements with staff. Some principals said that it might be a good opportunity to explore a combination of on-site and offsite working schedules. For instance, remote meetings could save travel time and resources and replace some face-to-face events. Similarly, principals recognised that parent-teacher interviews could also be held online in the future. While they might not replace face-to-face interactions, this may be an option for those who need the flexibility of online meetings (such as parents with long commutes).

Most principals noted that long standing communication strategies in place at their school drastically changed at the organisational level during the pandemic. Communication became more frequent and constant as principals needed to move fast to keep everyone in the loop. Principals highlighted the fact that transparency is crucial to leading a school through a crisis, both for staff, students and their families. Making sure that staff are on the same page allowed school leaders to better manage expectations and workflow across all teams. Connections with parents, already vital, had to increase during the pandemic and many principals altered their communication to allow for more timely and tailored feedback.

"Communication was very important during the crisis. But that's made me realise that it's probably important at all times as well, to communicate effectively with staff and with parents to give them pertinent information, but also to create a mood of us all working together, and us all moving towards a successful goal."

Principals saw a need to increase contact with families during the pandemic and inform them of the school's decisions and the rationale behind them. Many also had to engage in more personal conversations with parents who were struggling financially or juggling remote learning while working from home in a shared space. In an illustration of how principals expanded the communication to parents and families, one school created small parent groups to encourage parents to communicate with each other and to discuss any concerns. Such efforts highlighted the importance of having a strong connection to one's community.

"The benefit, during this period, came with a lot of faith and trust, and belief in what we were doing and an appropriate responsiveness to the particular needs of our community that comes from a really good understanding of one's community."

Nearly all principals agreed that their school community has grown stronger due to the experience of working together. They intend to continue using current communication platforms and methodology to leverage the solidarity created during the pandemic.

Enabling adaptability and agility in schools

Principals said they were more confident in crisis management after the first lockdown. Having gone through the initial disruption, many highlighted that learning from experience was a key aspect of being agile when leading through a prolonged crisis:

"In the second lockdown, obviously it was easier, we had a plan of what we will go to. I had strategies in place around how we were going to run the classes, how the staff room was going to meet, how we were going to look after each other's wellbeing, how the leadership were going to meet, how we were going to communicate with parents, and how we're going to look out for attendance and all those sort[s] of things."

Most principals interviewed felt that it was important to lead with calmness, honesty and transparency. Principals noted a shift of mindset concerning what is reasonable to expect from a school principal in times of crisis. A consistent finding throughout the interviews was that principals reported placing more focus on what they can control. They also reported becoming more comfortable with being uncomfortable, and many principals learned that they were able to use different skills and take calculated risks without knowing the consequences. Principals also spoke about how they had to be flexible to shift their goals along the way to respond to changing circumstances.
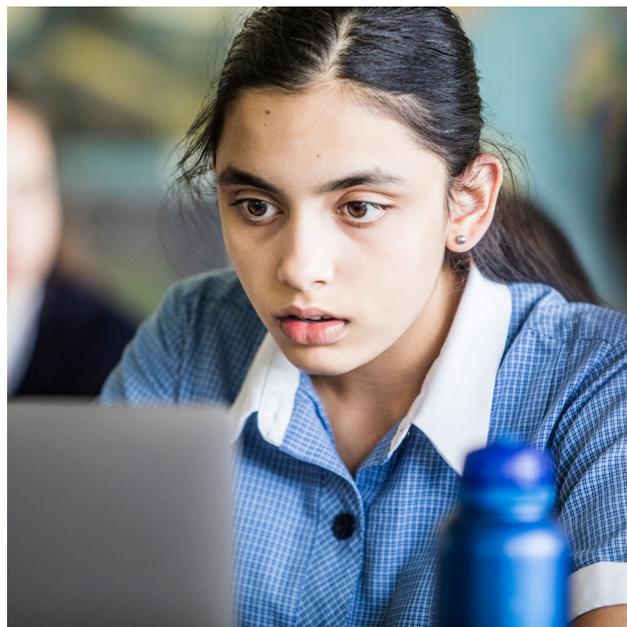
Overall, principals who participated in this study were not only able to deal with change, but to influence change. This corroborates Conboy's (2009) concept of agility being a two-way process – where people not only adapt to change, but contribute to change. The following are some examples of how principals became more comfortable with change throughout the pandemic and demonstrated agility and/or adaptability in their leadership:

- **Creation of change**
  Principals often re-assessed priorities and rapidly changed direction as they saw fit, revealing a willingness to take calculated risks and demonstrating that they could become agents of change. For example, one principal took 'an absolute almost diametrically different position' (just three weeks into their role) to prioritise human resources rather than building and infrastructure.

- **Pro-action in advance of change**
  Other principals proactively engaged in strategic foresight planning and decision-making based on anticipated needs by predicting school closures ahead of mandatory lockdown, identifying at-risk students and securing PPE equipment, understanding that change is typically needed ahead of time.

- **Reaction to change**
  Principals generally maintained a growth mindset and displayed a positive attitude towards creating a safe and encouraging culture for experimentation and innovation, providing guidance and support to their leadership teams, and allowing staff to learn and fail. This helped to enable feedback and new ideas.

- **Learning from change**
  Many principals reflected critically on their experience, including their leadership strengths and weaknesses. They also incorporated learning and feedback into practice at an operational level, sought advice and collaboration with other principals and shared stories/insights with others.

"I would be really disappointed if education went back to a safe, structured box that doesn't change. I think that being agile and adaptive is the most important part of being a school. Kids shouldn't fit school; school should fit kids."

The findings from our interviews also supported Conboy's (2009) suggestion that agility should not compromise value. As we have seen in the examples discussed thus far, there was a greater understanding among principals of the importance of connection and being proactive to influence change. Principals' priorities also shifted as a result. The overall experience of principals demonstrated that when things move fast, it is important to be adaptive and agile. While principals did not have answers to every question and situation, they were continually prepared to face current and potential challenges. The full extent of how principals practised agility during COVID-19 will be closely examined in an upcoming discussion paper to shed light on what agile mentality means for education.

While the pandemic is not yet over, Victoria did eventually go back to some normalcy at the time of our interviews with the principals. They also appeared to reach a 'tipping point' where disruptions became somewhat normalised, as they started to embrace the new normal.

Envisioning a COVID-normal future

Providing on-site education while maintaining various COVID-19 protocols was challenging. Some principals noted that mask-wearing and social distancing was problematic among students and staff. In fact, throughout the first and second lockdowns, around 74 per cent of principals said they were overwhelmed by operational challenges.

As a result, many changed their school's day-to-day operations in relation to staff meetings, delivery of learning, learning materials, technological tools and communication strategies etc. By the end of the second lockdown, principals were significantly clearer about what worked and what didn't and the changes to operating structures they would persist with in a COVID-normal school year.

Principals reported facing many ongoing complexities and challenges associated with flipping classes to online. For example, access to technology was a problem for several schools where students didn't have laptops to use from home, where internet connection was poor or the school's IT infrastructure was inadequate. One school had to use the telephone to deliver teaching and sent out paper-based work packs for their students. Other principals reported some practical challenges like timetabling and adapting to deliver subjects like Physical Education and Dance. Given that mandatory school closures can happen quickly, it is in a school's best interests to find effective ways to overcome these day-to-day operational challenges to lessen the impact when transitioning to remote learning in case of future lockdowns.

Additionally, we found that students' home environments can have a negative impact on remote learning. For example, principals reported that background distractions and conflicting schedules in the family can deter students from focusing and engaging with their learning. Nevertheless, if learning were to continue in an online space, principals agreed that it would undoubtedly open doors for some students (especially those in remote and regional schools) if they are able to access other subjects virtually.

Principals noted that some students had increased agency concerning their learning and were more able to assume responsibility to learn on their own. This suggests that some student groups could further improve their learning with shorter hours. For instance, senior students could benefit from the improved flexibility in school timetabling.

"The teacher has a very vital role, but it's not central. Students can actually, when they're guided, learn on their own or learn amongst their peers. So, I think that's a message that we need to continue to look at over the next couple of years."

Some principals also noticed that students with social anxiety benefited from studying in a home environment. As a result, 76 per cent of principals suggested that there is an opportunity to review aspects of the current school models and pedagogical approaches. Several principals outlined future plans to refine the current curriculum using an increased focus on digital technologies and developing new learning frameworks.

"I'd like to see education, as an institution, look at how schools operate. Look at more virtual school models, look at start times at 11 o'clock and finishing at five, or start time at one o'clock and finishing at seven. Why do we have to work from nine until 3:30? The factory model has come up for discussion lots this year, but I think we need to really step back and look at the institution of schooling in the Western world, and probably even the Asian world, and maybe conceive of it differently."

As the interviews took place towards the end of the second lockdown, most schools were preparing to resume on-site learning. Principals once again had to deal with similar compliance issues to ensure their schools were ready to return to a COVID-normal world. While the pandemic may not have impacted Australia the same way as it has other countries, principals are aware that we could go into lockdown again with short notice. During our interviews, 71 per cent of principals mentioned the need to engage in flexible learning. For example, principals talked about adapting different school timetables, alternating between synchronous learning and asynchronous learning, and using platforms like Google Classroom to deliver classes online. This suggests that there may be potential for creative blended-learning approaches to replace some of the conventional face-to-face school hours in the future.

Recognising the importance of mental health and wellbeing

Eighty-eight per cent of principals in our study reported that it was necessary to move mental health and wellbeing concerns to the centre throughout the pandemic. As the pandemic wore on, principals became increasingly aware of its social and emotional impact on their school communities and recognised that human connection is important in vulnerable situations. In response, some principals allocated extra resources across the school community such as employing mental health professionals. Others implemented initiatives such as calling students and families and facilitating regular wellbeing sessions to re-build social connections with their school communities. For example, one principal of a special school said that 20 per cent of their vulnerable and at-risk students took up 80 per cent of his school's focus during the pandemic and believes that such 'concerted, concentrated effort' would be beneficial for students who needed help the most.

Mental health and student wellbeing was already an issue some for schools prior to COVID-19. This was exacerbated by growing anxiety and social isolation during the two lockdowns. For example, student wellbeing was more prominent to principals when schools re-opened after the second lockdown, as students started showing signs of disruptive behaviour in classrooms. Consequently, some principals have implemented wellbeing support groups and incorporated more mental health programs to address increased demand. It may also be beneficial for teachers to attend short courses to ensure they are able to detect, intervene and provide support as early as possible for students who are not coping well. Principals observed that the impact of social isolation on mental health was more significant than the impact of education loss.

As such, it may be wise for schools (if they have not done so already) to adopt a holistic approach to education that not only provides quality learning, but sustains students' academic, social, emotional and mental health.

Sixty-two per cent of principals interviewed acknowledged that their staff worked extremely hard to flip the school curriculum and deliver remote learning and have been experiencing high levels of stress and fatigue during the pandemic. For example, during the first lockdown, teachers were expected to quickly learn new skills to teach remotely. Principals reported that many teachers became worn out due to the accumulative fatigue of remote learning. They commented on the fear of job losses that permeated through their staff, as well as the omnipresent pressure on teachers and teaching practice brought about by parents' ability to constantly observe and critique their child's online lessons. All of this impacted on the health and wellbeing of staff and school leaders alike.

While principals were generally proud of their staff's dedication and hard work, they recognised that it would be helpful to reassess how staff are coping in a COVID-normal environment, so that they can provide better support to look after staff wellbeing. In fact, some principals have already incorporated staff wellbeing sessions. Others have encouraged staff to take leave, and worked to ensure they felt safe in their jobs by having ongoing and open conversations about job security.

"Wellbeing has been a massive thing, something that we've been driving for a while but definitely came to the fore during this whole pandemic, was how much staff wellbeing, student wellbeing and all that is really key to a successful community."

Aside from the negative impact on student and staff wellbeing, 66 per cent of principals reported experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety and fatigue. This was especially the case for principals of schools that had to remain open to provide on-site learning throughout the pandemic, as anxiety would intensify whenever there was a community outbreak of positive cases, especially if it came from a nearby school or region.

Principals also noted that they missed the social interaction and incidental chats with others in the school environment that COVID-19 removed throughout 2020. As mentioned earlier, new principals are likely to be focussed on operational and financial challenges when transitioning into a new school or position. It was even harder for new principals to cope with stressful situations, as they did not have well-established connections with the school community or the extensive principalship experience to fall back on. This professional isolation was an additional layer.

> "...because I was a fairly new leader to my school and fairly new to principal at Independent schools, I didn't have the network that I would normally have, and that was...difficult for me. Further developing my network around me is important."

The findings from our interviews suggest that many principals may not have had adequate support or resources to cope with the mounting stress in a time of crisis.

> "It wasn't until mid-COVID, and I realised that I was really becoming quite stressed, and it was impacting my health."

> "I found myself more exhausted than ever...I found it really hard to identify why I felt so flat.'"

Given that principals had to work around the clock to manage the COVID-19 crisis, it was no surprise that they started to show signs of burn out. They reported having low energy and feeling tired, flat and often sad. Very few principals said they were able to manage some form of work-life balance. One principal said he was able to spend more time with his children as well as engaging in sports and recreational activities due to flexible working hours. Another principal was able to do some gardening on the side.

From their reflections, we learned that principals went through an incredible journey both professionally and personally in 2020. While principals experienced many setbacks during both lockdowns and continued to face challenges leading their school through the pandemic, they also demonstrated courage, hope and resilience.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, Australia remains relatively unscathed by the pandemic in comparison to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the findings of our study suggest that principals from Independent schools in Victoria faced immense challenges while leading their schools during the COVID-19 crisis throughout 2020. In this section, we explore some key lessons learned and how we can address some of the challenges identified thus far at macro, meso and micro levels.

At the macro level
(Large systems: departments, system-level bodies)

Prioritising mental health, wellbeing and embracing change in education

The survival and sustainability of schools is often dependent on external factors for which principals have minimal control – including but not limited to government funding, volatility of student enrolments, border closures and mobility, as well as financial impacts on families. Many issues do not have straight-forward solutions. For instance, according to some principals, support and resources for mental health among students remain systemically inadequate.

One example given was the continuing lack of trained psychologists for children. Another was the dearth of mental health beds in Victoria. While the introduction of self-help resources, peer support groups and community partnerships may temporarily counter these deficiencies, the increasing demand for competing resources on mental health and wellbeing should not be seen purely as an institutional problem.

According to the final report released by the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, the Victorian Government 'has begun implementing recommendations, funded through an initial commitment of almost $870 million in the 2020–21 State Budget' to change the mental health system where demand exceeded supply and relying on approaches that are more reactive than proactive in preventing mental health crises (State of Victoria, 2021).

This highlights a need to develop more targeted and sustainable mechanisms in schools to address the underlying issues and awareness of mental health and wellbeing confronted by Victorian youth on a societal level. At the time of writing, the Australian Government announced that $3.8bn of the federal budget will be committed to mental health services over the next four years (Murray-Atfield & Willingham, 2021). To maximise the social impact of mental health spending, education departments and system-level bodies will need to work closely with schools to improve and align relevant policies to better support students who are most vulnerable.

On a more general trajectory, education is evolving as a sector, as more and more schools embrace change. Our study suggests that while some schools have always planned or started looking into blended learning, the pandemic undoubtedly accelerated the agenda to embrace more online learning. Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis further validated the importance of schools staying relevant and competitive in the digital era. Many schools recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all school model or pedagogical approach. Regardless of where learning takes place (virtually or face-to-face), quality education should look and feel personalised. Many schools are continually identifying and providing additional support for their students' learning needs to create more student-focused and collaborative processes.

School transformation starts with understanding current school context and stakeholders. Being mentally prepared for potential changes in education and encouraging the use of evidence from research (both internal school data as well as existing and emerging knowledge) would help principals to make informed decisions. The need to evaluate, predict, monitor and improve operations/teaching and learning outcomes is also paramount. Our research suggests that many schools are considering approaches to maintain flexibility to accommodate adjustments when required.

Schools could be encouraged to actively improve ways in which they diagnose student learning and conduct assessment, encourage student voices, balance academic achievement with teaching independent and soft skills beyond standardised curricula. They could also allow more elasticity in timetabling and promote community involvement in shaping student learning agendas. Schools may also wish to engage in programs that aim to enhance metacognition to facilitate more opportunities for students to develop agency to learn and practise deep learning.

At the meso level:
(Medium systems: communities, school networks, industry)

Building resilience and community

The findings from our interviews suggest there is a clear shift in principals' leadership styles throughout the COVID-19 crisis. This shift saw most principals become more people-focused. The power dynamics concerning principals' leadership continue to evolve as we move into a COVID-normal phase, with a strong emphasis on communality rather than individuality. 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go further, go together.' This saying was especially true for most principals, as they relied heavily on their staff during the pandemic.

Principals also recognised that connection and engagement with communities is one of the most important aspects that influences a school's long-term sustainability and growth. Being aware that followership is just as important as leadership (i.e. principals cannot lead without the backing of their staff and communities) could have many practical implications on school leaders. For example, this could prompt principals to ease procedures and formalities associated with their school's operations and, in turn, increase time, resources and efforts on fostering meaningful relationships and empowering staff to become more involved in planning and decision-making. This may also allow more time for principals to perform other duties, such as encouraging parents to become co-educators, as well as actively seeking out opportunities to collaborate with other schools and/or organisations.

While it is not possible to anticipate every need in the wake of a crisis, some sort of contingency planning may help to manage sudden disruptions. For example, having a solid ICT infrastructure in place – including adequate storage capacity, connectivity and know-how from an end-user perspective – afforded some schools a smoother transition from face-to-face learning to an online environment. We found that it is equally important for principals to have early and open conversations with stakeholders about their school's capacity to deal with disruptive and changing circumstances.

Providing transparency and developing mutual trust gave some principals increased confidence to respond to the COVID-19 emergency. For instance, principals may seek to engage with families on a more personal level to contextualise and understand their individual struggles. Recognising what students, staff and families need would not only help leaders and their schools to survive a pandemic, but create the necessary conditions for a school to thrive and build resilience as a community.

The findings from this study suggest that principals were fighting apart, but not alone. Given that principals already demonstrated ample collegiality to support each other during the pandemic, it would be worthwhile to build on this momentum to strengthen and expand current networks. For instance, establishing ongoing strategic alliances through collective formal and informal initiatives may help schools to share information and resources not only in trying times like a pandemic, but also in a COVID-normal future.

At the micro level:
(Small systems: individual level)

Learning from mistakes and practising self-care

Some principals viewed the COVID crisis as an opportunity to adapt to the changing environment and circumstances. However, others took a more agile and proactive approach – why wait for a crisis if one can create and influence the change they wish to see in their school? The good news is that adaptability and agility are not mutually exclusive. As one principal put it, 'Agility is pivoting on the spot. Adaptability is changing the waltz, changing the dance.' Thus, one can also be more adaptable and agile through practice.

Principals agreed that they were better at crisis management in the second lockdown compared to the first. The key to agile leadership is to overcome fear of failure – being able to learn from mistakes is better than no learning at all. Admitting that one does not have all the answers, not turning away from the trial-and-error learning curve and being willing to show vulnerability to others are the essence of what makes leaders authentic, humble and human.

In our interviews, many principals also noted that staff went above and beyond to assist students and families under extraordinary circumstances. To support staff, it is important to recognise that routine and ordinary work can also require high involvement and be emotionally intensive. If anything, those in roles deemed 'essential' (e.g. teachers, health-workers) need to feel valued, supported, empowered and fulfilled during a crisis. For example, being less operational, less task-orientated and less productivity-driven would put more emphasis back on the 'human' component of a school's human resources. To offer holistic support for their staff, principals could continue to obtain periodic feedback and involve staff in planning and decision-making processes.

They could also facilitate genuine collaboration across different departments and encourage staff to practise self-care on a regular basis.

It is equally important for principals to address physical, mental and emotional exhaustion for their own wellbeing. Failure to prevent, recognise and intervene burnout could lead to detrimental impacts such as chronic fatigue and depression. To lead and support school communities, principals must first take care of themselves. This means they may sometimes need to reassess competing priorities and learn how to say 'no' to unrealistic expectations. Setting boundaries that separate work and life to create more balanced schedules, maintaining social interaction to counter isolation and loneliness and taking time off are also beneficial for general wellbeing. It is not uncommon for principals to neglect their own needs because of other pressing responsibilities. For example, one principal commented that she did not even have the time for a haircut. Principals may need to recognise that it is okay to reach out for help (professional or otherwise, even just talking to someone casually). It is okay to step away from the computer screen and establish a routine to engage in physical activities. And if burnout is unavoidable, principals should try not to internalise the blame and instead allow plenty of time to decompress and heal.

The year 2020 was like no other. The coronavirus spread without warning, and no one was prepared for the scale of the pandemic both globally and locally. While principals of Independent schools in Victoria faced many challenges that emerged from the crisis, their stories captured by our research also demonstrate newfound confidence and optimism through courage, hope and resilience. As highlighted by their experiences, agile leadership requires more than just readiness to respond to changing circumstances and competing priorities. To lead effectively in a crisis, principals must continue to inspire others, engineer collective opportunities and drive the changes they wish to see in education.

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Appendix

Ethics approval

Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee

Approval Certificate

This is to certify that the project below was considered by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Committee was satisfied that the proposal meets the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and has granted approval.

Project ID:	26439
Project Title:	Leadership amid the pandemic – an exploration of principals' experience and agility leading through crisis
Chief Investigator:	Dr Venesser Fernandes
Approval Date:	27/10/2020
Expiry Date:	27/10/2025

Terms of approval - failure to comply with the terms below is in breach of your approval and the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*.

1. The Chief Investigator is responsible for ensuring that permission letters are obtained, if relevant, before any data collection can occur at the specified organisation.
2. Approval is only valid whilst you hold a position at Monash University.
3. It is responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure the project is conducted as approved by MUHREC.
4. You should notify MUHREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
5. The Explanatory Statement must be on Monash letterhead and the Monash University complaints clause must include your project number.
6. Amendments to approved projects including changes to personnel must not commence without written approval from MUHREC.
7. Annual Report - continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an Annual Report.
8. Final Report - should be provided at the conclusion of the project. MUHREC should be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected completion date.
9. Monitoring - project may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by MUHREC at any time.
10. Retention and storage of data - The Chief Investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of the original data pertaining to the project for a minimum period of five years.

Kind Regards,

Professor Nip Thomson

Chair, MUHREC

CC: Mr Michael Noonan, Dr Pei Yi Wang, Ms. Winnie Wong

List of approved documents:

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Supporting Documentation	Email invitation_Agility Leadership formal 28092020	28/09/2020	1
Explanatory Statement	School Leaders Explanatory-statement_ISV Leadership Amid the Pandemic_28092020	28/09/2020	1
Consent Form	School Leaders Consent form_ISV Leadership amid the pandemic_28092020	28/09/2020	1
Supporting Documentation	Interview Protocol for School Leaders Interview _ISV Leadership Amid the Pandemic_28092020	28/09/2020	1
Consent Form	School Leaders Consent form_ISV Leadership amid the pandemic_23102020	23/10/2020	2
Explanatory Statement	School Leaders Explanatory-statement_ISV Leadership Amid the Pandemic_23102020	23/10/2020	2

Research invitation

Research invitation

Dear contact.firstname

We are going through unprecedented times with extraordinary demands placed on school leaders. During the first COVID-19 lockdown, we spoke to a number of school Principals across our sector. Your stories provided a salient snapshot of the resilience, creativity and agile leadership required to navigate Independent schools through the COVID-19 crisis.

Building on these themes, we would like to invite you to participate in a research project that explores agile leadership. In conjunction with Dr Venesser Fernandes from Monash University's Faculty of Education, Independent Schools Victoria (ISV) intends to explore your experiences in leading schools through a time of crisis. This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Monash University.

What's involved?
The research involves participating in an interview via phone or teleconference, which should take approximately 45 minutes. Your response will be anonymous and the final reports will not identify specific individuals or schools.

We understand and appreciate that your time is extremely valuable. We believe that the knowledge and experience gained from a Principal's lens will have a tremendous impact on local and international school leaders and educators – now and beyond the current pandemic.

An ISV staff member will contact you to ascertain your interest in participating in this project over the next few days, or click on the link below to express your interest.

We hope you will be part of this important research project.

Best wishes,
Michelle