



Luck or Providence? Research findings on how principals ensure the legal safety of their schools

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This paper outlines recent research conducted in Tasmania concerning the impact of legal issues on the working lives of school principals across the Government, Catholic and Independent school sectors. The study focused on the areas of principals' legal literacy (encompassing the legal areas they deal with, the accuracy of their legal knowledge and confidence in that knowledge, and sources of their legal information) and legal consciousness; the legal context faced by principals; negative impacts of their legal dealings, and ways principals consider their legal supports might be improved. Whilst some of the findings from this research accord with the previous studies conducted by Stewart (1996) and McCann (2006), a number of the findings present new perspectives on school principals' dealings with legal issues.

The research was based on a quan + QUAL mixed methods inquiry in which data were collected through an on-line survey of Tasmanian principals and a series of semi-structured interviews with a range of people in Tasmanian education, including principals, principal supervisors, system leaders, administrators and a Government education lawyer. The study was the first of its kind in Australia to begin to address the experiences of Independent school principals together with their colleagues from other systems, as well as providing a more complete and rounded picture by including the views of practising principals and other informed perspectives.

Two findings from the study have particular relevance in relation to Education for a Safe World: the impact of principals' legal consciousness (beliefs, not knowledge) regarding school safety; and safety for principals, in terms of the legal support framework within which they make legal decisions.