



## **Teaching Principalship**

**Submission to the  
Joint Oireachtas Committee  
on Education & Skills**

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# 1 Background

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IPPN is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. It is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education as an official Education Partner, IPPN works with the DES, the National Parents' Council, management bodies, unions, education agencies, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,500 Principals and Deputy Principals.

As a body supporting principals in their professional and personal development, IPPN has an obligation to highlight the increasing challenges faced by those principals who teach full-time in addition to their leadership role – commonly referred to as 'Teaching Principals - and to make recommendations that will address some of those challenges, so that Teaching Principals may be enabled to focus on their core function – to lead the teaching and learning in their schools.

This position paper sets out these challenges and recommendations, with particular reference to the impact of work overload on the ability of Teaching Principals to effectively lead and manage the teaching and learning in their schools, and also on their personal health and well-being.

IPPN's number one priority for several years has been securing a minimum of one day a week for Teaching Principals to undertake their school leadership responsibilities. IPPN has also lobbied extensively about other supports for teaching principals, as outlined in our October 2015 position paper '[Administration Days for Teaching Principals](#)' and our May 2016 position paper [Reducing the Threshold for Administrative Principalship](#).

We have conducted numerous surveys of our members to ascertain the key issues, the solutions members feel would work best for them and to clarify members' priorities, including:

1. **Principals' Priorities for Education** – Nov 2015. Such is the level of awareness of the issues, ALL members agreed that the top priority should be additional leadership and management days for Teaching Principals. While this is not the only issue of importance, this prioritisation has been highlighted and reiterated to officials at every meeting since.
2. **Health and Safety of principals** and deputy principals - presented to Education partners, including DES, management bodies and INTO, in January 2015 highlighting our concerns for the health and safety particularly of teaching principals
3. IPPN research publication [New Horizons for Smaller Schools and Teaching Principalship](#) was ground-breaking – it clarified for the first time the challenges of the role of teaching principal and set out possible solutions, including clustering.

Our recent submissions have all highlighted that additional supports for Teaching Principals, particularly one leadership and management day per week, are the top priority. These submissions include Pre-Budget Submissions for Budget 2018, 2017 and 2016, submission on the *DES Action Plan 2016 - 2019: 2017 Priorities* (November 2016), submission on *A Programme for a Partnership Government* (June 2016), submission on *DES Statement of Strategy 2016-2018* (June 2016) and our submission to Minister Ruairi Quinn in January 2014 on Administrative Burden.



## 2 Context

Over half of primary school principals teach full-time in addition to their school leadership role, as close to 2,000 schools in the state have fewer than 177 pupils. The proportion of school leaders who teach has fallen significantly over the past few decades, from almost 80% in 1996 to 58% in 2017. This is due to population growth leading to increased enrolments; amalgamations and school closures; as well as small changes in the threshold for ‘administrative principalship’ (non-teaching school leadership) introduced by the Department of Education and Skills in 2013, 2016 and 2018.

### 2.1 Leadership and Management Days (‘Release days’)

After consistent lobbying by IPPN, in 2000 the then Department of Education and Science (DES) introduced the concept of ‘release days’ to allow Teaching Principals to ‘undertake administrative, leadership and management functions’ ([PC13/2000](#)). IPPN members prefer the term ‘leadership and management days’ to ‘release days’, as it more closely reflects the work they undertake during this time. Two years later, again following advocacy by IPPN, the DES issued [PC25/2002](#), increasing the number of such days for Teaching Principals to a maximum of 22 days per school year (which is 36 weeks in duration). There have been two further increases since 2002. In 2016, the days were increased to a maximum of 25 ([12/2016](#)) and from September 2018, they will further improve to a maximum of 29 days per school year - [Circular 40/2018](#).

Based on IPPN’s objective of a minimum of one leadership and management day per week for Teaching Principals, we propose a progressive approach towards achieving this goal. While it may be difficult for the Department to achieve this in one step/budget, we anticipate and seek progress each year in terms of ‘leadership and management days’ as follows:

|                            | * No. schools | 2001 | 2002 | 2016 | **Sep 2018 | Oct 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|----------------------------|---------------|------|------|------|------------|----------|------|------|
| Principal + 0/1/2 teachers | 526           | 12   | 14   | 15   | 17         | 22       | 30   | 38   |
| Principal + 3/4 teachers   | 776           | 16   | 18   | 20   | 23         | 28       | 33   | 38   |
| Principal + 5/6 teachers   | 427           | 20   | 22   | 25   | 29         | 33       | 35   | 38   |

Table 1

\* estimated number of schools in each category, IPPN membership data. Information not available from DES

\*\* number of release days allocated per Budget 2018 – announced in [Circular 40/2018](#) in June 2018

It is important to note that the number of teachers counted for the calculation of leadership and management days refers to mainstream class teachers only. It does not take into account additional support and ancillary staff such as learning support teachers, resource teachers, special class teachers, special needs assistants, ancillary staff or bus escorts, nor other staff such as nurses and occupational therapists that are often allocated to special schools. These additional staff members add huge value to each school but also result in significant additional duties for the Teaching Principal, as all staff must be managed, led and supported.



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It is also worth noting that the principals of the smallest schools have the least administrative capacity - owing to the wholly inadequate ancillary services grant - and also the fewest days for leadership and management – an inequitable situation that must be urgently addressed.

## 2.2 Work overload

Overload for school principals is not a new issue. At the very first Principals' Conference in Cork in 1994, six years before IPPN was founded, concern was expressed about the excessive workload being handled by school leaders. It has been a priority topic for discussion at every Principals' Conference since. Meanwhile, workload issues continue to escalate with each passing year.

In numerous consultation surveys, IPPN has consistently heard from Teaching Principals that one non-teaching day per week would have the most significant impact on reducing work overload. At Conference 2015, IPPN was asked by Minister for Education and Skills Jan O'Sullivan to prioritise areas for increased spending in future education budgets. When surveyed by IPPN, the top priority for all principals - both administrative and teaching - was one 'administration' day per week for Teaching Principals. There are other key requirements that would also help to alleviate the burden on Teaching Principals and make the role more sustainable. It is against this background and in this context that IPPN presents this paper.



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### 3 The Issue

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The work overload of primary principals is well documented - by IPPN, INTO, management bodies and others - and has been acknowledged by successive ministers for education and senior DES officials. All principals can attest to the relentless pace of change in the sector – countless acts of legislation, circulars, curricular policies, initiatives, programmes, policies, guidelines and other elements of change have been introduced into primary schools over the past ten years alone. The inclusion of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream schools and the opening of SEN units for pupils with Autism and speech and language disorders were significant advances in primary education and have come with very significant additional challenges and accountabilities for school leaders. The increasing interaction between parents and schools has also resulted in additional workload for teachers and school leaders. While all these improvements and initiatives are in themselves laudable and worthwhile, there are leadership and management ‘capacity’ implications that cannot be ignored, and have never been adequately resourced or resolved.

The two main statutory provisions that underpin the role of the school principal are Circular 16/73 and the Education Act (1998) - the former stressing management and supervisory aspects of the role and the latter emphasising the learning, developmental, consultative and leadership aspects of the role (Fullan, 2006). The change of emphasis has resulted in an expansion of, rather than a revision of the principal’s duties.

Teaching Principals have two critical roles to fulfil. They have full-time duties as teachers, more often than not teaching in multi-grade settings. They are also school principals with significant leadership and management responsibilities, many of which cannot be delegated. It could be argued that they are doing three jobs because they have only part-time administrative support. They are in an impossible situation – they can focus neither on their teaching nor on their leadership role, both of which are critical to the school, its pupils and its staff.

It is clear from what Teaching Principals tell us that lack of time to deal effectively with their workload is having a negative effect on their ability to focus on leading teaching and learning. This should be a serious concern for the DES because of the inevitable consequences for schools. An international study by the London School of Economics in 2014 of management practices concludes that it is leadership that makes schools successful. Michael Fullan’s *‘Quality Leadership ⇔ Quality Learning: Proof beyond reasonable doubt’* (2006) also makes a powerful argument that if we expect our school leaders to function effectively as leaders, then we must support them with sufficient time to do so.

School leaders told IPPN that they need sufficient leadership and management days (‘release days’) to undertake vital leadership and management responsibilities, including:

1. Leading teaching and learning/ classroom visits to other teachers
2. Planning/policy development/School Self-Evaluation/School Improvement Planning
3. Special Educational Needs, including managing ASD and Speech and Language classes
4. Meetings with staff and external parties/BoM prep/case conferences
5. Interpersonal relationships/staff management
6. General administration
7. Professional development
8. Building projects.



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Simply put, school leaders require sufficient time and resources to fulfil the critical school leadership role and to minimise the anomalous structural and resource variances between those who lead and manage full-time and those who must also teach.

At IPPN's Conference in January 2015, Dr. Philip Riley – Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne and Program Director of Principal Health and Wellbeing Surveys in Australia and Ireland - presented us with stark evidence that teaching principals' health and wellbeing is suffering as a direct consequence of their role. He points out that school leaders

*'score on average well above the population on all the negative elements (burnout, sleeping troubles, somatic and cognitive stress) and below the average on positive measures (self-rated health, mental health, coping, relationships and self worth).'*

He further comments that

*'Teaching principals (...) report lower levels of physical and mental health, coping, confidence, autonomy, personal wellbeing and a raft of other negative factors, along with the highest levels of work-related stress. (...) The current report presents strong evidence of the negative factors associated with the role.'*

In short, the health and well-being of almost 60% of the primary school leaders in our country is at serious risk!

'Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion – Well-being in Primary Schools', published jointly by the DES and the Department of Health, suggests that 'within the school context, positive mental health promotion should focus on enhancing protective factors and minimizing risks.' No school principal would argue that the mental health of children is not vitally important. Nonetheless, it is ironic that school leaders are leading the implementation of strategies to protect and minimize risks for the children in their care while their own health and well-being suffers from work overload.

There has been a marked increase in the number of principals using IPPN's Leadership Support service in recent years. It is absolutely clear that many are stressed and overwhelmed by the challenges of the dual role. Many are availing of early retirement or stepping back from leadership to focus solely on teaching.

The current situation is unsustainable - something has to change.



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## 4 Recommendations

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To alleviate the significant burden on Teaching Principals, and to help make the role more sustainable, IPPN is calling for the following solutions to be put in place:

1. **A minimum of one leadership and management day per week for all Teaching Principals**, to be taken at their own discretion
2. Provide for the establishment of **a national panel of qualified substitute teachers allocated to clusters of schools** - to ensure adequate and consistent cover for Teaching Principals' leadership and management days
3. Of the 137 special schools currently in operation, 18 of their principals are teaching principals. Due to the complexities of the role of principal of a special school, the large numbers of non-teaching staff and many special schools catering for both primary and post-primary pupils, IPPN recommends that principals of all special schools be automatically designated as administrative principals.
4. Provide for **adequate skilled administrative support for Teaching Principals** - to ensure that all administrative work can be delegated effectively and overseen by these school leaders. Teaching Principals, particularly those in the smallest schools, are dealing with the 'double jeopardy' of having the least amount of leadership and management days to carry out their leadership role, as well as the least amount of administrative support in the education system.
5. As part of the working group on principals' workload, **set up a 'Calendar of Reform' to streamline, prioritise and manage all education sector change** to minimise disruption to schools, and to school leaders, and to increase the likelihood that each element of change will end up becoming adequately embedded to achieve the intended outcomes.
6. In relation to the threshold for administrative principalship, IPPN recommends:
  - a. **The threshold to be based not on pupil enrolment numbers but on the overall staffing level in each school**, to include teaching as well as non-teaching staff as the management of non-teaching staff also add significantly to the principal's workload
  - b. **The thresholds for the appointment of administrative principals in DEIS schools, and in schools with special autism units be maintained or reduced** proportionally.
  - c. **All 137 principals of special schools should be 'administrative'** with immediate effect.
7. Currently, if a principal wishes to 'step down' - for whatever reason - the existing structure in place has serious weaknesses. It is often in the best interest of the school and its pupils to facilitate the principal to step down from their leadership role. Currently, this results in the principal being placed at the most junior position of the seniority ladder, which means that if there is a drop in enrolment numbers, the former principal is the first person to be placed on the redeployment panel. This is the most undignified treatment of someone who has led the school, perhaps for several years. **Where a principal cannot continue in the school leadership role, s/he should have the option to step back into teaching without loss of seniority.** They should also be able to retain a proportion of their pension at their principal's salary level, commensurate with the number of years served as a principal.



8. **The significant pay anomalies in relation to school leadership (both middle and senior leadership roles, and across primary and post-primary sectors) are a cause for concern.** The recent introduction of external recruitment of deputy principals highlights the discrepancy in pay between principals and deputy principals, as the anomalies could act both as a disincentive for deputy principals to step up to the leadership role of principal and also as an incentive for principals to step back from principalship to take up a better-rewarded role of deputy principal in a larger school. Reward structures for assistant principal, deputy principal and principal roles should reflect their relative role responsibilities. Similarly, primary and post-primary reward structures should be on an equal footing, as the role accountabilities are the same, regardless of students' age profiles.
9. The role of Deputy Principal, as the primary support for the Principal – per [DES Circular 63/2017](#) - has never been adequately defined. Consequently, its potential in developing leadership and management capacity has not been fully realised in some schools. IPPN recommends that **the role of deputy principal be reviewed, to assign significant leadership, management and administrative responsibilities commensurate with the role** and reflecting the core priority as a key support for the principal.
10. The current structure of Boards of Management (BoMs) is based on the willingness of volunteers to participate in the running of schools. This model is unsustainable because the skill sets needed to properly resource a Board of Management are often lacking. Extensive research carried out on 500 BoMs shows that much of the discussion and energy of the board is spent on lower order managerial tasks c.f. *Primary School Governance – Challenges & Opportunities*, IPPN, 2011. Boards generally are not performing their true governance role. Where this is the case there can be an undue dependency on the Principal to manage areas that are the function of the Board. This results in a confusion of responsibilities between the BoM and the principal and is particularly challenging for Teaching Principals. **IPPN recommends that expertise in law, finance, human resources, IT and construction be centrally provided to Boards** (as is the case within the ETB sector at post-primary level) to enable them to carry out the responsibilities envisaged in recent education, equality, welfare and health and safety legislation.
11. Principals spent a significant amount of time dealing with financial issues, and fundraising to manage the shortfall between school expenses and DES capitation funding (€170 per pupil in 2017/18). It is critical that schools are adequately resourced, to allow principals to refocus their energies on teaching and learning and to cease requesting financial contributions from parents to pay for basic requisites, and to start replacing outdated and broken resources. Over the next three budgets, IPPN is requesting that **capitation grants be increased to €300 per pupil**. This would bring funding for primary schools into line with post-primary schools, ending an unfair and inequitable anomaly that has persisted for decades. In the short term, the grant level needs to be restored to pre-austerity levels i.e. the €200 per pupil given to schools in 2009/10.



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## 5 Conclusion

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‘In 21st century education, it is critically important that principals can focus on doing the right thing – leading and managing the quality of learning in their school. An overloaded principal runs the risk of losing that focus.’

Who could argue with former Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn T.D. in his foreword to IPPN’s publication *‘Priorities for Principal Teachers – In Clear Focus’* (2014)? Yet, four years later, Teaching Principals are still expected to fulfil their leadership and management role with between 9% and 16% of their time allocated by the Department to these leadership duties (9% = 17 days per year allocated to the principals of the smallest schools - with up to three teachers; 16% = 29 days per year allocated to those who lead schools with five to six teachers.)

There is evidence that the quality of leadership in schools impacts directly on the quality of learning of pupils. There is evidence that lack of time and inadequate administrative supports to deal effectively with workload are barriers that prevent Teaching Principals from spending ‘quality time’ on their leadership function and there is evidence that this is having a particularly negative effect on the health of 58% of primary school leaders.

It is IPPN’s belief that this situation is no longer sustainable. The solutions proposed in this position paper will go some way towards creating a fairer and more equitable environment in which all school leaders can thrive.

*‘There is proof beyond reasonable doubt that quality leadership and quality learning go hand in hand. It is time to strengthen this powerful bond through action’.* (Fullan, 2006)