



## IPPN Survey on Principals' Workload 2004 Executive Summary

In October 2004, the IPPN Executive conducted a survey of 850 Irish primary school principals to determine the current concerns about their role. The main objective is to accurately represent these concerns to the Department of Education and Science (DES) working group on Principals' Workload Issues which was instigated in the summer of 2004.

A number of open questions (free form response) were put to principals in the survey. Specifically in relation to *principal workload*, the questions put to them were as follows:

If you consider your current workload to be 'overloaded' or 'seriously overloaded',

1. Which aspect of your job is causing the greatest overload?
2. How has the school suffered?
3. How have you (as principal) suffered?
4. If you were to prioritise one initiative that would *reduce your workload* as principal what would that be?
5. If you were to prioritise one change that would *improve the functioning* of your Board of Management, what would that be?

The main themes arising from the hundreds of detailed responses to each of these questions, as well as significant concerns raised by a smaller number of respondents, are set out below in sections corresponding to the numbers and titles above.

### 1. Which aspect of your job is causing the greatest overload?

It is important to note that not all principals feel overloaded. 25% of principals say their workload is either acceptable (1% !) or very busy but manageable (24%). However a significant majority (75%) feel they are overloaded or seriously overloaded.

In a number of cases, principals comment that they have taken a conscious decision not to accept overwork and prioritise tasks in such a way that they tackle the important over the less important, consequently certain items either never get done or are put indefinitely on the long finger.

The key aspects of their role causing greatest overload are:

- *Non-educational tasks*
- *Paperwork required by the Department of Education and Science and other agencies*
- *Special Education Needs*
- *Conflicting demands on Teaching Principals* between class teaching and school leadership
- *Lack of resources* - including IT, secretarial, caretaking, Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), resource teachers, physical working space
- *People management issues* including staff under-performance, disruptive pupils, Boards of Management and parents
- *Lack of support from the In-School Management team*
- *Unplanned interruptions*
- *Maintaining a full complement of teaching and non-teaching staff*
- *New revised curriculum*
- *Inactive or ineffective Board of Management*
- *Legal/litigation culture*

While most principals feel that these activities do fall within their remit (with the notable exception of the non-educational responsibilities discussed in further detail below), it is the increased *volume* and *complexity* of activities required to be done *concurrently*, coupled with increasingly high expectations of principals among all stakeholders, which has caused the increase in workload. When the strategies to reduce workload are factored in, it seems to be the lack of qualified resources which is the single most important factor in the overload (see section 4 below 'If you were to prioritise one initiative that would *reduce your workload* as principal what would that be?').

Another issue cited by a significant number of principals, which adds to the burden of overwork and the high levels of frustration, is *inadequate accommodation and poor working conditions*. 75% of principals confirm that they either have part-time or no secretarial support available to them while 45% have no dedicated principal's office. Several who do have an office report that they have insufficient space for secretarial staff and/or visitors, no natural light, poor or no ventilation and little or no storage. It is difficult to imagine leaders in any other profession working under such conditions. The combined effect of these working conditions often mean it takes far longer to get simple tasks done, for example there is nowhere private to hold a conversation with a parent or pupil and nowhere to store and deal with paperwork, leading to a longer working day.

Each of the main causes of overwork will now be discussed in turn, with quotes from principals to highlight the emotion or rationale behind the responses in certain cases.

### ***Non-educational tasks***

The most frequently cited reason for overwork is the myriad of activities and responsibilities that have very little to do with a child-centred educational system. The list of such activities includes building management, repairs, building projects, maintenance; ordering equipment, office and janitorial supplies, checking and paying bills and chasing payments; budgeting, grant applications; fund-raising; as well as other ancillary tasks such as arranging the bus escort service and school transport.

While all of these activities need to be done to enable the smooth running of any primary school, they take up a disproportionate amount of time in the principal's week relative to their importance to the education of the individual child. Most principals would prefer to delegate all non-educational activities to a qualified professional manager and focus instead on educational leadership, monitoring and raising teaching standards, supporting their staff and attending to all other pupil-related responsibilities.

Often the Principal does not feel skilled to tackle these non-educational tasks, certainly in most cases they have had no training to do so which means that often they are not done to the satisfaction of the principal, parents or the BoM. Very often they have to be dealt with outside school hours or during the summer "holidays", which of course contributes significantly to many of the problems noted in section 3 below 'How have you (as principal) suffered?'. .

### ***Paperwork required by the Department of Education and Science and other agencies***

The number of policies, reports, initiatives and other demands for information from the DES and other agencies has increased significantly over the past 5-10 years. While most principals agree that the aims of many of the initiatives are laudable and worthwhile, they feel that there is too little thought given to the deadlines and sequencing of such initiatives, to the provision of support to schools in completing the required work and also that there is a lot of duplication which could be eliminated if the DES were to co-ordinate or design the paperwork better.

In several instances, deadlines are set close to the end of the school year or even during the school "holidays" or are set too close together such that there is insufficient time to complete the tasks without significant overtime. Again, much of this work ends up having to be done outside school time.

In many cases, the information required by the various sub-departments within the DES or by the various agencies could be gleaned from another agency or from information already provided to the DES. The lack of an integrated national pupil database is cited a number of times as a factor. The lack of secretarial support is significant as many of the requests for information could

be completed by secretarial staff familiar with the school rather than the principal but it often falls to the principal as there is either no funding or insufficient funding for adequate secretarial support.

A factor that exacerbates the situation and causes huge frustration among principals is the perceived *total lack of support and response from the DES* when they are contacted to clarify part of the form/policy/circular, whether their queries are submitted by telephone, fax, e-mail or registered letter. Several principals report spending literally all day trying to get through to the DES, some with the phone held up to their ears while they teach class! There are also many incidents of paperwork being lost by the DES, of individual cases not being handed over between staff when on leave of absence and other such unprofessional behaviours which would not be tolerated of principals by the DES or by any other employer.

*Policy formulation* is an area that principals feel contributes to overwork, particularly where there is a lack of secretarial and/or caretaker support to deal with non-educational issues and also where the In-School Management team is ineffective. It takes time to read, assimilate, consider and reflect on a new policy before determining how to implement the policy at a local level. Most principals would prefer the support of their In-School Management team to formulate such policies and find that the pressures of time result in less than adequate time being spent on such important tasks. Several principals requested detailed sample policy statements that could be tailored to the needs of their particular school rather than bare templates that have been made available in the past, if at all.

### ***Special Education Needs***

SEN management is cited as a major burden in terms of time and energy across the board. Specifically, the complexity of the processes, the time it takes to process each application and the difficulty in obtaining appropriate resources in a timely manner *even where the DES has approved an application* takes its toll. While all principals appreciate that Special Needs pupils are entitled to and deserve access to a good education, the time it takes to sort out each individual case means that all other pupils potentially suffer from reduced levels of attention to their needs. This is particularly true in the case of Teaching Principals.

The perceived complete lack of support from the DES appears to be the number one problem in many principals' eyes. Pupil assessment, funding applications, hiring and administration of SNAs and resource teachers, communication with parents, psychologists, social workers and the several agencies involved in SNE all require time from the principal. Many principals suggested that the Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) could reduce this workload significantly to the benefit of the whole school, and particularly to the Special Needs children and their families.

It is hoped that the new National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the enhanced role and authorisation of the SENO will improve the process significantly to the benefit of all. There will certainly be significantly far more interaction between principals and SENOs with the introduction of the Individual Education Plan (IEP). However, with 1 SENO per 10,000 children, it remains to be seen whether the new council and the SENO role will streamline and speed up the process or whether they will become two further bureaucratic layers to negotiate for the principal.

### *Conflicting demands on Teaching Principals*

There is a constant struggle between class teacher responsibilities and school leadership responsibilities resulting in a feeling that neither element of the role is delivered on to the satisfaction of the Teaching Principal. Most Teaching Principals feel that the dual role is impossible and that there was simply no time left in the week, having responded to all the urgent tasks that come their way, to spend time on evaluation, planning or any other task on the medium- to long-term horizon and they feel that this is where they could 'add the most value' and where they should be spending a greater proportion of their time.

Many principals feel that the overload can only be addressed by removing one or other role from their remit, i.e. promote them to Administrative Principal, allow them to opt for Special Education duties or even allow them to return to full-time teaching duties without loss of status. The stress of trying to balance the needs of the pupils and all the other primary school stakeholders adds to the feeling of overload.

A number of Teaching Principals stated that they consciously prioritised the teaching element of their role as they felt a moral obligation to the children to do so. However, they consequently worked many additional hours in their personal time to carry out their administrative duties and still they feel that there are key elements of their jobs that they are unable to devote time to and deal with effectively.

Taking into account the most popular strategies suggested in the survey to reduce the workload of Teaching Principals, it becomes clear that additional qualified resources made available to the principal or changing the role to remove certain responsibilities are the only viable ways of tackling the serious problems facing the Teaching Principal. The strategies are ranked in order of popularity, with the most popular first:

- permanent supply teacher for a cluster of schools to release the TP on a rotational basis - at least 1 day per week
- reduced threshold for appointment of Administrative Principals
- additional release days (conditional on a qualified replacement teacher familiar with the school being available)

- allow Teaching Principals the option of Special Education duties as an alternative to class teacher role
- additional secretarial support
- appointment of professional school manager to address all non-educational tasks
- create clusters or federations of small schools with a permanent Administrative Principal and BoM per 2/3 schools totalling 180 pupils
- additional caretaking support

### *Lack of resources*

The overwhelming majority of principals, both Administrative and Teaching Principals stated that the provision of additional qualified resources would alleviate most of the problems leading to overwork, stress, frustration, anxiety and many of the other difficulties they face.

Irrespective of the type or size of the school, the principals share a need for adequate cover and support to enable them to dedicate themselves to educational management. In the case of Teaching Principals this would mean either removing their teaching duties by changing their role to that of Administrative Principal, allowing them to opt for Special Education duties and/or providing a fully qualified substitute teacher for a cluster of schools such that they are available to each principal on a rotational basis for a minimum of 1 day per week, are familiar with each school's procedures, staff, issues and do not require in depth handover each time the principal has a release day. In the case of the Administrative Principal, this would mean relieving the Deputy Principal of their teaching duties, appointing a professional manager to handle all non-educational responsibilities and/or providing release time for the In-School Management team. Additional secretarial and caretaking support was cited by most principals, Administrative and Teaching.

Particularly in smaller schools where resources are scarce, the principal often has to become a 'jack of all trades' to get basic tasks done - fixing computers, unblocking toilets, ordering goods, paying invoices, taking calls from parents, the DES, agencies, commercial callers while also trying to teach a class (sometimes with several Special Needs children and/or non-nationals) and deal with administrative tasks- sometimes all in the same day!. Most of these tasks are not mentioned in any role definition and certainly the principals are not rewarded for their efforts. Having adequate support from qualified IT, secretarial, caretaking staff, Special Needs Assistants and substitute teachers, even if shared among a cluster of small schools, would go a long way.

Most importantly to the principal, lack of resources means they have far less time to dedicate to important issues such as teaching children and leading the school. Let's face it; this is what *everyone* wants them to do!

### ***People management Issues***

Staff underperformance, while not commented upon in great numbers, causes a high level of frustration and even resentment as it results in additional work having to be taken on by other staff, usually the principal, to compensate. The perceived lack of clarity in the guidelines for dealing with poor performance hinders effective management of these staff and the threat of litigation when they are tackled is another concern raised.

Managing challenging behaviour, particularly continually disruptive pupils, is cited as another task that takes up a disproportionate amount of time and certainly negatively affects the other pupils and class teachers. Principals have felt physically threatened by such pupils and their families and it is an area that some feel ill-equipped to deal with effectively. The line taken by the DES stipulating that schools cannot exclude such pupils except in extreme cases leaves many principals feeling that there is nowhere else to turn.

A huge number of principals stated that, owing to overwork, they spend insufficient time acknowledging, supporting, encouraging, mentoring and monitoring their staff and that this leads to lower morale and poor staff relations. The camaraderie that was apparent in times past is eroding and many teachers are feeling undervalued. The reduced level of support and respect afforded to teachers and principals by parents in recent years has also had an impact and several principals feel that if they had more time to spend speaking to parents' groups and individual parents, they could help to turn this attitude around.

The Board of Management is another group that many principals mentioned having trouble dealing with effectively. In particular the fact that most, if not all, other members of the Board are not recompensed in any way for their time or their expenses, means that principals find it extremely difficult to ask them to take on specific tasks. While many BoMs are extremely supportive and effective, many are not and do the bare minimum. This leads to principals accepting more work from each BoM meeting on top of all the other responsibilities they shoulder. This is dealt with further under the heading 'Inactive or ineffective Board of Management' below and also in section 5.

### ***Lack of support from the In-School Management team.***

The problem of under-performing staff is discussed under People Management Issues above. In several of the cases where lack of support from the ISM team was cited as a problem, teachers seem happy to take the allowance and do very little work to support the principal in the areas they are in theory responsible for. The lowering of staff morale among teachers is cited as a contributing factor such that teachers feel they are doing as much as can be expected of them given the difficulties they face and the rewards they get.

The allowances are also considered paltry given the complexity of some of the tasks and the time required to complete them.

Many principals feel that the system should be scrapped and that it would prove more effective to replace it with the appointment of a professional school manager, who would take care of all non-educational activities, and the provision of release time for teachers to support the principal in the formulation of policies and the development of the new curriculum. Others felt that while many teachers provided a lot of support and did their best in the time available to do what was asked, it was simply not enough. Several pointed out that the system for appointing Post Holders was 'antiquated' and that it was far too difficult to remove poorly performing ISM team members from their posts.

### ***Unplanned interruptions***

Second only to the difficulties surrounding SEN management as the most often cited cause of frustration, stress and irritation is the ongoing problem of unplanned interruptions. Salespeople, parents, social workers, DES staff, doctors, nurses and a whole range of other callers who 'drop in' without an appointment or phone and expect immediate response from the principal. Each of these callers believes that what they need is important and should be dealt with there and then and this lack of understanding causes enormous frustration. It is especially burdensome when trying to teach a class of up to 40 pupils, where quality of teaching and learning suffer significantly.

Many principals feel that an awareness campaign needs to be carried out with the various groups e.g. the DES, the external agencies, Parents Association and the Parents Representative on the Board of Management in an attempt to get across the importance of booking time ahead or at least calling outside class hours in the case of Teaching Principals and the impact on the school and the quality of teaching when interruptions occur.

### ***Maintaining a full complement of teaching and non-teaching staff***

Ensuring each class has a qualified teacher and that there is a principal or substitute available at all times is increasingly difficult. As the teaching profession has become less attractive, the numbers of qualified teachers and substitute teachers is falling and this is even more apparent for principal teachers. Note the decline in the ratio of applicants per vacancy for each new post of principal over the past 8 years from 5.5 : 1 in 1996 to 2.9 : 1 in 2004. This figure is an average, the ratio is far worse in the case of Teaching Principals.

Finding qualified people to cover for sick leave, study and other planned leave; getting funding for and hiring qualified resource teachers; getting funding for

and managing new teaching staff, writing and publishing job applications, interviewing, assessing, inducting and mentoring new staff takes up a significant amount of principals' time. The text-a-sub.ie and educationposts.ie websites have gone some way to alleviating some of the difficulties.

Many principals feel that the administration of part-time staff such as resource teachers, special needs assistants should be done centrally as it would be far more efficient and effective than expecting thousands of principals to stay updated on PRSI, tax and other payroll-related issues.

### ***New revised curriculum***

While many principals commented that the revised curriculum is an exciting and positive step forward in primary education and that they fully support its introduction, several believe that the timescales are too aggressive given the other concurrent initiatives that schools are expected to support and the increase in general administration that has to be dealt with.

Principals need to take the lead in introducing the revised curriculum to their schools. However, they feel that they cannot be expected to implement it on their own, they require the support of their fellow teachers. The lack of involvement from or time available to others in planning and implementing the curriculum means that the principals take on an excessive proportion of the burden, potentially to the detriment of the quality of its implementation as teachers may feel ill-informed and unprepared for the changes. Release time from teaching duties in school time is cited as a way to alleviate this problem and ensure all teachers who should be involved, can be.

### ***Inactive or ineffective Board of Management***

While a number of principals stated that their BoM was fully supportive, very effective and well qualified, they were a significant minority. There is a definite need for clear and unambiguous roles and responsibilities for each board member which should be communicated and understood by candidates prior to election to the Board. Currently, as these roles are not sufficiently clear, the responsibilities (and thus the activities) ultimately and usually rest with the principal and chairperson.

Hundreds of principals commented that as the Board of Management is largely made up of unpaid volunteers, it is extremely difficult to ask them to take on tasks over and above their oversight responsibility. However, many principals also state that their BoMs simply did the bare minimum, even failing to show up to meetings and showed little or no interest in actively supporting the principal to address school issues. Some comment that it can be very difficult to get anyone involved in the Board of Management, let alone qualified, well-motivated people and some are clearly falling far short of the ideal!

Several believed that the BoM served no useful purpose at all. Many principals stated that the BoM concept should be scrapped in favour of professional full-time managers who would devote themselves to the non-educational aspects of the school and a more hands-on inspectorate (or similar) to oversee the educational leadership aspects i.e. to support and monitor the principal's work.

### ***Legal/litigation culture***

The past 10 years has seen a fundamental shift in the way we live - the pace of life has increased exponentially, technology has radically altered the way each of us works and lives and along with these changes has come a shift in mentality among a portion of society from one that is self-sufficient and supportive of others to one that could be considered self-serving and even at times disrespectful or dismissive of others.

Twenty years ago, a minor incident such as a fall in the playground resulting in a scratched knee would have warranted a phone-call or a note to a parent and a band-aid in the teachers' room. Now the same incident can be seen by a significant minority of the community as an opportunity to gain financially, often by grossly exaggerating the impact of the incident - emotional pain, anguish, stress and so forth. This is commonly referred to as 'compo culture' - "if I can sue someone and get money for it, I will".

This cultural change has resulted in a huge increase in the volume of very detailed records on small incidents being required.

## **2. How has the school suffered?**

Now that we understand the main factors leading to overwork among primary principals, it is important to understand the impact these problems have on the primary school itself. Then we will look at the impact on the principals.

It is important to note that a sizeable number of principals insist that the school does *not* suffer from their personal work overload because they actively see to it that it does not. Comments such as "The school hasn't suffered at all, I have", "The school has gained, my wife and family have suffered and my golf handicap has gone through the roof!" are examples of this viewpoint. However, these principals conceded that they themselves do suffer, and frequently, suffer very badly as a consequence of their work overload and the additional stress of ensuring that the school does not suffer - "It hasn't (suffered) but I can't last much longer".

Among the majority of principals who believe that their schools do suffer as a result of their overwork, the main difficulties for the school are as follows:

- Urgent tasks get attended to rather than the important ones. Reacting to rather than planning work. Short-term rather than long-term focus. Items such as Plean Scoile, revised curriculum and staff development are put on the long finger, sometimes indefinitely.
- Lack of leadership and direction causes a lowering of teaching standards owing to lack of time for class contact and teacher evaluation. Some principals cite a degradation in staff discipline and unhealthy staff relations as specific consequences of their own lack of time to attend to staff issues.
- Staff morale on a downward spiral as there is less time for principals to engage with staff on personal issues, professional development and teamwork.
- Monthly targets (Cuntas Miosuil) never achieved, constantly playing catch-up
- Newly qualified teachers receive very limited support and find the job more difficult than expected leading to low morale and potentially poorer teaching standards
- Very little interaction with pupils which means many principals feel unable to properly communicate with parents and others about the children in their care
- For Teaching Principals, class preparation and pupils' education suffer significantly. Many feel that they are 'winging it' in the classroom and that children of a particular ability level receive little individual support as the principals attempt to meet all the demands at their door. (Comments on the survey varied: sometimes gifted, sometimes average and sometimes even struggling children were mentioned in this regard.)
- Principals are less effective in their roles as teacher, colleague and principal owing to the stress and exhaustion arising from overwork and everyone in the school environment suffers as a result
- Pupils do not benefit from the non-essential elements of the curriculum which could offer them significant rewards as individuals and help them reach their full potential. These include science projects, competitions, sports, recycling campaigns, choir, and drama. Many principals (and teachers) thoroughly enjoy these aspects of their job but have had to prioritise other responsibilities.
- Fun and joy is lost from school life, impacting everyone
- Problems being dealt with on the surface with the underlying cause going unresolved
- Poor school maintenance leading to lowering of pride in the school
- School looks less professional to parents and the wider community when there is difficulty in dealing with their needs. Losing the support of parents causes teacher morale to dip further still
- Record-keeping deteriorates (not good in a 'Compo Culture'!), school accounts and grant applications not up to date, general lack of organisation
- DES deadlines missed leading unfairly to poor impressions of schools that are trying very hard

- Staff are less well informed when the principal misses out on information meetings, seminars and conferences
- The school can miss out on opportunities for funding or resources if there is little time to research what is available
- Less involvement in the wider community

### **3. How have you as principal suffered?**

In addition to the implications for the school of the work overload on the part of the principal, there can be serious implications for the principal. The comments received by some principals made for very sobering reading.

While a few principals (less than 20) stated they did not personally suffer, these were the minority who either said they were not overworked or the very small number who stated that they were very near retirement and were doing the minimum necessary to get them to their retirement date in one piece! In the overwhelming majority of responses, there were multiple indicators of suffering and a very worrying level of ill health.

#### ***Health - Physical and Emotional***

Almost every principal mentioned stress as a consequence of their workload. While this is inevitable in most jobs, particularly the professions, most principals say they are suffering far more from stress than at any other time in their careers or lives. In many instances, stress goes hand-in-hand with other problems, is made worse by other problems or indeed causes or exacerbates health problems.

A worrying number of principals have been advised by their GP to take sick leave in order to protect their health. While several have done so, up to 12 weeks worth, many refused to take the time off (in some cases because they feel they would face an even worse situation on their return) and continue to struggle badly.

Several responses referred to very serious illnesses - cancer, heart disease, depression, hypertension, allergic reactions, persistent insomnia, panic attacks, ME, stomach ulcers - and many were told that these were largely caused by 'stress of the job'. This is hugely worrying, particularly as many of these principals are in their 30s and 40s.

Exhaustion, burn-out, migraine, tiredness, anxiety, anger, despair, a sense of hopelessness and difficulty sleeping are some of the other emotional and physical health problems being faced by a large number of principals. Many principals also say they dislike the changes in their own personality that result from their stress and tiredness and that they exhibit bad behaviours they would

ordinarily take others to task for e.g. impatience, irritability, grumpiness, crankiness, intolerance, and short-temper.

### *Job satisfaction*

Several respondents say they would 'hand back the keys in the morning' if they could, that they are 'at the end of their tether', 'hanging on by a thread', 'not sure how long more they can last', 'looking forward to early retirement'. They feel very 'isolated', 'alone', 'exposed' and they no longer enjoy the job they felt so positive about a number of years ago. There is 'significantly less enjoyment out of the job than in the past'. The consistency and depth of these feelings does not bode well for the future of principalship in Ireland if something radical is not done to improve the situation.

Principals feel guilty that they are not doing the job to the standards they set for themselves and others and guilty about the effect on their pupils, their staff, their families, their friends. They feel unable to provide inspiring leadership and support their staff effectively and unable to meet the extremely high expectations placed on them by everyone - staff, pupils, the DES, parents, BoM, society. Several cited a lowering of self-confidence in recent years as they struggle to achieve targets, feel overwhelmed by the demands placed on them and deal with reducing levels of parental support.

Feelings of being 'undervalued', 'underpaid', and 'unmotivated' pervade the responses.

Several principals say they would love to go back to teaching and give up the responsibilities of the post but the policy of going back to the bottom rung of the school ladder and the ensuing loss of status and allowances prevent them doing what they feel would improve their lives significantly. They feel there should be an honourable way out, particularly after a specified period of time such as 5 years as principal.

### *Family/Social*

A high proportion of principals believe their families suffer enormously from the effects of their overwork. They bring work home with them almost every day and most weekends. They miss important family occasions, spend many personal hours on school work, are unable to spend as much time as they should on their own children's schooling and many have had to give up activities and hobbies which are important to them.

Several people commented that the INTO needs to work urgently with the DES to sort out the issue of working hours and principals' remuneration once and for all such that there was recognition for all the work they do, proper evaluation of what they should and should not be responsible for, and that more time is required in a working day than class hours to achieve it.

The workload during the “summer holidays” causes particular anger and frustration as they need this time to “recharge their batteries”, recover from the school year and return refreshed in September to face the new school year. Many principals get as little as two weeks off during the summer owing to Summer Works Schemes, recruitment and forward planning activities that could not be completed before the summer recess. There is a feeling that much of the work done during this period is completely unnecessary if the DES planned such activities as recruitment more efficiently and employed a professional manager to oversee non-educational activities such as school building works.

In general there is a feeling that the quality of life of the principal has taken a nosedive in recent years.

#### **4. If you were to prioritise one initiative that would *reduce your workload* as principal what would that be?**

When asked to select from a pre-set list of suggested strategies for reducing the workload of the principal, the following were the most popular:

##### Teaching Principals

- permanent supply teacher for a cluster of schools to release the TP on a rotational basis for administrative and planning tasks
- reduced threshold for appointment of Administrative Principals
- additional release days
- additional secretarial support
- principals to have the option of Special Education teaching duties
- appointment of professional school manager to address all non-educational tasks
- create federations of small schools with a permanent Administrative Principal and BoM per 2/3 schools totalling 180 pupils
- additional caretaking support

##### Administrative Principals

- release Deputy Principal from teaching duties
- appointment of professional school manager to address all non-educational tasks
- additional secretarial support
- additional caretaking support

Further initiatives proposed by principals were:

- release days for the In-School Management team
- clear roles and responsibilities as well as *accountability* for Deputy Principal, all In-School Management team members and the Board of Management

- significant improvement in levels of support from the DES, particularly in relation to Special Needs Education but also in terms of general queries and a commitment to a reduction in unimportant bureaucracy
- centralise such services as purchasing and IT, with qualified support staff to purchase, install, maintain, upgrade and service hardware and software, thereby saving time as well as money owing to increased purchasing power
- scrap the BoM system altogether, insist on making the whole thing more professional and hands-on and/or improve the training the BoMs attend significantly and make it mandatory
- provide a dedicated Principal's Office for every principal in every school with proper ventilation, natural light, adequate storage and space for visitors and/or the secretary i.e. what the manager/leader of every other company/organisation in the land enjoys
- enhance the role of the Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) to encompass the whole process, to streamline, simplify and speed up the process for everyone and involve the principal only where absolutely necessary. Provide for release time where required
- provide standard, tailorable policy and curriculum plans suitable for the majority of schools rather than basic template formats with little content
- reduce pupil/teacher ratio especially for Teaching Principals and to take into account special needs and non-national children
- remove the requirement for the BoM chairperson to sign off on all DES forms
- release time for all teachers to provide input to/ be informed about policy development and other initiatives
- ban junk-mail and sponsorship by companies - increases paperwork and in some cases is morally suspect e.g. Coca Cola endorsement of GAA
- dramatically increase allowances to attract high quality teachers into principal role and retain the existing principals
- electronic roll books
- appoint classroom assistants to help deal with disruptive pupils or to support Teaching Principals while attending to other tasks
- remove all Health Board activities from schools
- agencies to provide their own staff to complete forms using secretarial input from the schools and principals only where their skills rather than their time is necessary
- rationalise the whole system for teaching and other staff recruitment so as to complete it before summer recess.

Principals were at pains to point out that increasing the number of release days and/or providing additional resources is insufficient in and of themselves. These resources MUST be well paid and qualified to carry out the tasks required of them. This is particularly the case for substitute teachers for principals'

release days. They need to be familiar with the school, its procedures, rules and policies and not just any teacher on a panel who will require significant handover and support to cover for each release day.

A sensible suggestion is that there would be a permanent substitute teacher available to a cluster of smaller schools or 1 or 2 larger schools who would become very well acquainted with each school and could step in on a rotational basis with little or no impact on the school, the principal or the sub. The current situation means that many principals opt out of their release days as it is too difficult to plan and manage the downtime.

## 5. If you were to prioritise one change that would improve the functioning of your Board of Management, what would that be?

The responses to this question varied from 'scrap the BoM altogether' to 'I'm happy with my BoM, they are very effective and supportive' and several shades in between.

The following are the most commonly cited changes proposed:

- Pay the BoM members, particularly the chairperson who is considered to have a very onerous job and the treasurer who ideally brings specific skills to the job i.e. accounting skills. This would help to incentivise people to be more proactive and hands-on and would alleviate some of the concerns of the principal about delegating work to the BoM. At the very least pay travel and other out-of-pocket expenses and some token in appreciation of their efforts
- Specific roles, responsibilities and *accountability* to be outlined *prior to the election* of members to the Board of Management so that each member knows what is expected of him/her and can be held accountable for their work. Have each member provide a short progress report at each meeting to 'focus their minds'!. This might prevent principals needing to report that "5 out of 8 of my BoM are about as useful as potted plants, they are doing the role as a favour!".
- Rotate the responsibilities among Board members so that one person is not 'stuck' with the less desirable elements for the duration of their tenure
- Improve the quality and quantity of training for the BoM members and make it compulsory
- Quite a few principals cautioned that such endeavours would most likely serve to reduce further the involvement of already very busy people and put people off getting involved, particularly if the roles remain voluntary and unpaid
- Appoint professionals to the Board as required (e.g. solicitor, accountant, health & safety officer, engineer) and pay them accordingly

- to improve the effectiveness as well as the efficiency of the Board and reduce the burden on the volunteers. Additionally, ensure that at least one member other than principal is well versed in educational matters
- Ensure each member of the Board takes responsibility for a particular area of the school's functioning (e.g. maintenance, finance, fund-raising, cleaning) and relieve the principal from the burden of these duties
  - Change the system whereby BoM members are all replaced at the same time at the end of their 4-year term to enable consistency, continuity and stop the principal having to train up a whole BoM from scratch. Also, the automatic replacement of the board after 4 years should be reconsidered. Why change it if it's functioning well?
  - Replace the BoM altogether with a system whereby every school or group of smaller schools has an Administrative Principal, with a full-time secretary, a dedicated office, caretaker staff and grants paid up-front. Another variation on this theme was the appointment professional manager for each school (or a cluster) to tackle all non-educational activities and enhance the role of the inspectorate to support and monitor the educational leadership of the principal
  - Revisit the role of parents' representatives in the BoM as there can often be misunderstanding about their role vis a vis the Parents Association (e.g. where they use the forum to raise specific complaints rather than use the correct procedures) and conflict of interest where the principal is responsible for a parents' representative's child
  - Ensure that those who regularly miss meetings are removed from the post
  - Eliminate church control, particularly the bishops' election of the chairperson. System considered completely outdated and irrelevant in the current times.
  - Cluster a number of small schools into a single BoM. "There is no need for an 8-member board in a 3 teacher school"
  - More meetings. Fewer meetings. Facility to communicate between meetings! (Comments depend on how effective the particular BoM is...)
  - Reduce the number of Board members to 5. Increase it to 10!
  - PR exercise needed to raise awareness in the community of the importance of the BoM, also to ensure BoM members know the importance of confidentiality and how tough the role of principal is - all leading to better school leadership.