



IPPN Position Paper Wellbeing of School Leaders



Table of Contents

Background	2
An IPPN Priority	2
Context	3
■ Wellbeing as a stated priority within education	3
■ IPPN's Sustainable Leadership project	4
What the data is telling us	5
■ The Irish Principal and Deputy Principal Health & Wellbeing Survey	5
■ Data relating to negative health outcomes	6
■ Sources of stress	7
■ The conclusion and recommendations of the researchers	7
■ Wellbeing in Post-Covid Schools: Primary school leaders' Reimagining of the Future	8
Responsibility for the wellbeing of school leaders	9
■ Personal Responsibility	9
■ Employer Responsibility	10
■ Responsibility of the DE	10
What supports are currently in place?	11
What's happening elsewhere	11
■ Northern Ireland	11
■ Australia	12
■ Canada	12
What IPPN is progressing now to improve role sustainability and wellbeing	13
■ Greater role clarity for school leaders	13
■ More discrete time for leadership in all schools	14
■ Greater capacity to share leadership	15
■ A governance structure that has the capacity to discharge its onerous responsibilities	15
Recommendations	18



Background

IPPN is the 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 Department of Education, 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 6,400 Principals and Deputy Principals.

The purpose of this position paper is to explore the issues pertaining to the wellbeing of Irish primary school leaders, to establish why they are relevant to leadership and school effectiveness, and to make proposals and recommendations that seek to have a positive impact on school leader wellbeing.

It is IPPN's hope that the relevant stakeholders will consider the merits of the proposals and

recommendations set out here, and engage with primary school leaders in order to find ways of enhancing the experience of the practice of leadership of our schools. It is further hoped that the position paper will encourage school leaders to reflect on their own leadership practice with a view to ensuring they prioritise actions that will impact positively on their personal wellbeing.

An IPPN Priority

IPPN has 31 city/county networks around the country. Our National Council comprises of 3 nominees from each city/county network, giving a total of 93 members. These members are either administrative, teaching or deputy principals in schools of every different kind of context.

This ensures that a rich variety of perspectives and experiences feed into the work of the three committees of the National Council.

One of these committees focuses on Advocacy & Communications. In early 2023, following a process of consultation, the committee identified Wellbeing of School Leaders as one of its top two priorities and areas of focus. In 2023, the Committee worked on the other priority - Special Educational Needs Resourcing, Allocations and Appeals. It is in this context that this position paper has been framed.

The position paper:

- takes account of the current reality in which leadership is practiced and its impact on the health and wellbeing of school leaders
- draws conclusions and makes practical recommendations to impact positively on school leader wellbeing
- endeavours to communicate a message of hope to school leaders about the importance of their wellbeing, and what they and others can do to promote and protect it.

Context

WELLBEING AS A STATED PRIORITY WITHIN EDUCATION

In 2001, the World Health Organisation (WHO) defined wellbeing as follows –

‘Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life’.

The Department of Education’s Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2019) clearly articulates that:

- wellbeing is a central component to the realisation of our full potential
- it is compromised by a range of societal challenges and

- schools have a key role in promoting the wellbeing of young people and in equipping those young people to deal with the challenges that impact on their wellbeing.

While it is acknowledged that the promoting of wellbeing is a shared responsibility and that many factors that impact on wellbeing are located in the home, schools are identified as *‘a powerful context for healthy development in enhancing protective factors and minimising risks’* to the wellbeing of young people. It is noteworthy that one of the protective factors identified within the policy statement is the wellbeing of school personnel.

School leaders are also identified as being critical to the successful implementation of a wellbeing promotion process through the *‘review and*

The ongoing and necessary focus on the needs of others comes at a cost with the cumulative emotional and physical burden taking a significant toll on the wellbeing of school leaders.

development of school structures to support that implementation'.

This responsibility for the promotion of wellbeing is one that schools and school leaders have actively embraced. Indeed, its importance became more acute during the Covid-19 pandemic both when schools were operating remotely, and when they reopened in circumstances that were not conducive to enhancing wellbeing.

The ongoing and necessary focus on the needs of others comes at a cost with the cumulative emotional and physical burden taking a significant toll on the wellbeing of school leaders. The question may reasonably be asked – how can school leaders effectively promote the wellbeing of all other members of the school community, if their own personal wellbeing is so significantly compromised? The extent to which that wellbeing is compromised is detailed in this position paper.

IPPN'S SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP PROJECT

The importance of school leadership as an influence on, and key determinant of, pupil learning has been clearly established. The equation is simple – effective school leadership leads to school effectiveness, which in turn leads to better outcomes for children. It is, therefore, a priority that school leaders should be empowered and supported to deliver that effective leadership in our schools, thereby maintaining their focus on what is most closely aligned with their core purpose – leading teaching and learning.

IPPN's mission is to enhance leadership capacity, effectiveness and sustainability, in order to better ensure effective schools that deliver those better outcomes for children. Ensuring the existence of that leadership capacity, effectiveness and sustainability, will empower existing school leaders to thrive in their roles, and will also encourage greater numbers of aspiring leaders to take up senior leadership positions in our primary schools.

IPPN's direct engagement with school leaders highlighted the increasing levels of challenge, frustration and disillusionment experienced and articulated by school leaders in response to their experience of the practice of leadership. The intensity of that sense of frustration and disillusionment has noticeably increased in recent years and prompted IPPN to undertake its Sustainable Leadership project.

The purpose of the project is to explore and understand:

- why so many of those who are tasked with one of the most strategically important roles in education, and a key determinant of a school's effectiveness, are struggling to sustain themselves in those roles
- what are the factors that are undermining that sustainability
- what is the impact on their leadership practice
- what are the implications for their health and wellbeing, and
- what can be done to render school leadership roles more sustainable.

In phase 1 of the project, IPPN:

- provided a research-informed analysis of the current reality of primary school leadership and
- explored the key issues and identified solutions that will have a positive impact on leadership capacity, effectiveness and sustainability, with a consequential positive impact on school effectiveness and outcomes for children.

This culminated in the publication of a report in November 2022 - ***Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action - A Roadmap to Sustainability*** - which can be accessed [here](#).

In November 2023, IPPN published a progress report on the project in order to

- reaffirm the rationale underpinning the project.
- highlight what actions had been undertaken and what progress had been made since the publication of the original report.

- provide an up-to-date evidence base that demonstrates an ongoing need for action.

The progress report can be accessed [here](#).

There are four elements to the evidence base:

1. The extent to which the workload of school leaders has increased since 2016
2. The nature of that workload with reference to the domains of the quality framework for leadership and management
3. The impact of the preceding factors on the sustainability of leadership roles
4. The impact on the health & wellbeing of school leaders as measured by an independent research study.



What the data is telling us

THE IRISH PRINCIPAL AND DEPUTY PRINCIPAL HEALTH & WELLBEING SURVEY

In 2022 the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), the professional associations representing Irish school leaders, commissioned independent research into the health and well-being of Irish school leaders. This was in response to concerns that the increasing complexity and workload demands of school leadership roles is impacting on the health and wellbeing of principals and deputy principals.

Professor Philip Riley and his research team in Deakin University, Melbourne, undertook the 3-year longitudinal study research study. Its stated aims were to:

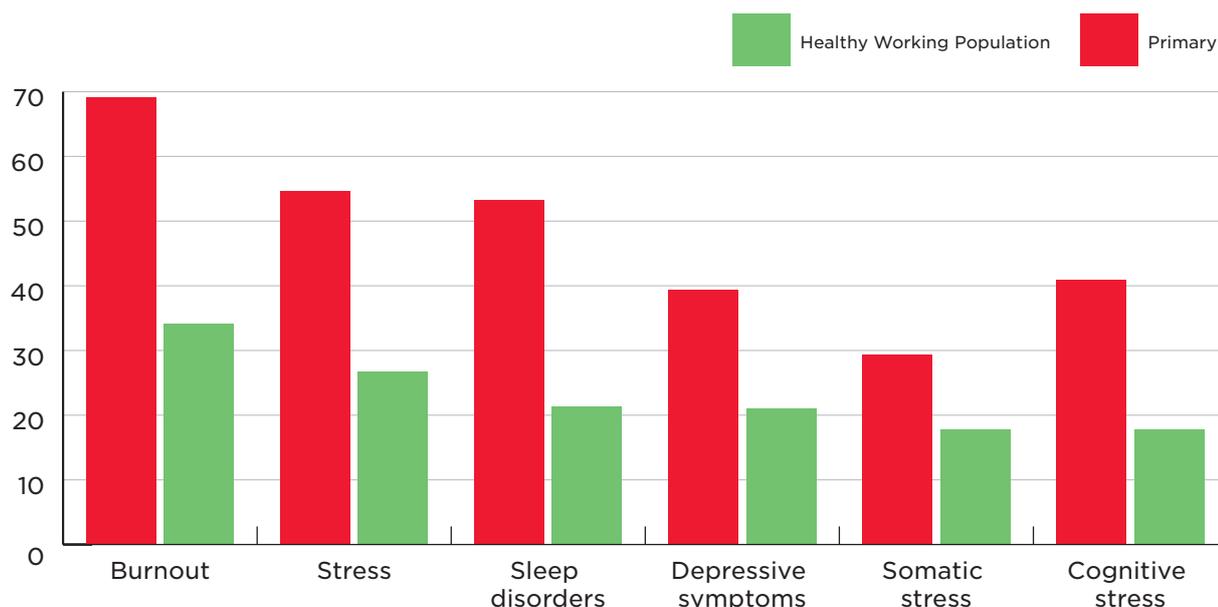
- support individual school leaders to prioritise their own health and wellbeing.
- enable IPPN and NAPD to benchmark the demands on school leaders in Ireland against comparative international statistics as well as the impact of those demands
- help to improve the leadership reality of Irish school leaders so that their leadership roles are more sustainable

- ensure the identification and delivery of supports for members in partnership with the Department of Education and other education stakeholders
- have a significant impact on future policy development in Ireland.

The tool used to conduct the research was the *Irish Principal and Deputy Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey* which is a confidential survey for all school principals and deputy principals of both primary and second-level schools in Ireland.

Over 1700 Irish school leaders engaged with the survey over the course of the three years of the study. Participants in the research study received detailed, individualised reports in relation to their own personal health and wellbeing while the aggregated data formed the basis of the sectoral specific reports, which detail the impacts of workload and work environments on the health and wellbeing of school leaders. Reports have been received in respect of the 2022 and 2023 datasets with the 2024 report due to be issued in the autumn of 2024. The longitudinal nature of the research allows for the analysis of trends and provides comparative data year on year with regard to the health and wellbeing outcomes of school leaders in Ireland.

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Comparison of Health & Wellbeing Outcomes of Irish Primary School Leaders and the Healthy Working Population 2023

DATA RELATING TO NEGATIVE HEALTH OUTCOMES

One of the key metrics in the research study is the use of the aggregated data to calculate the mean scores of school leaders for specific negative health and wellbeing outcomes and then comparing them to the mean scores of the healthy working population.

The most recent report on the 2023 data details that **four of the six negative wellbeing scores of school leaders (burnout, stress, sleep disorders and cognitive stress) are now more than double those of the healthy working population.**

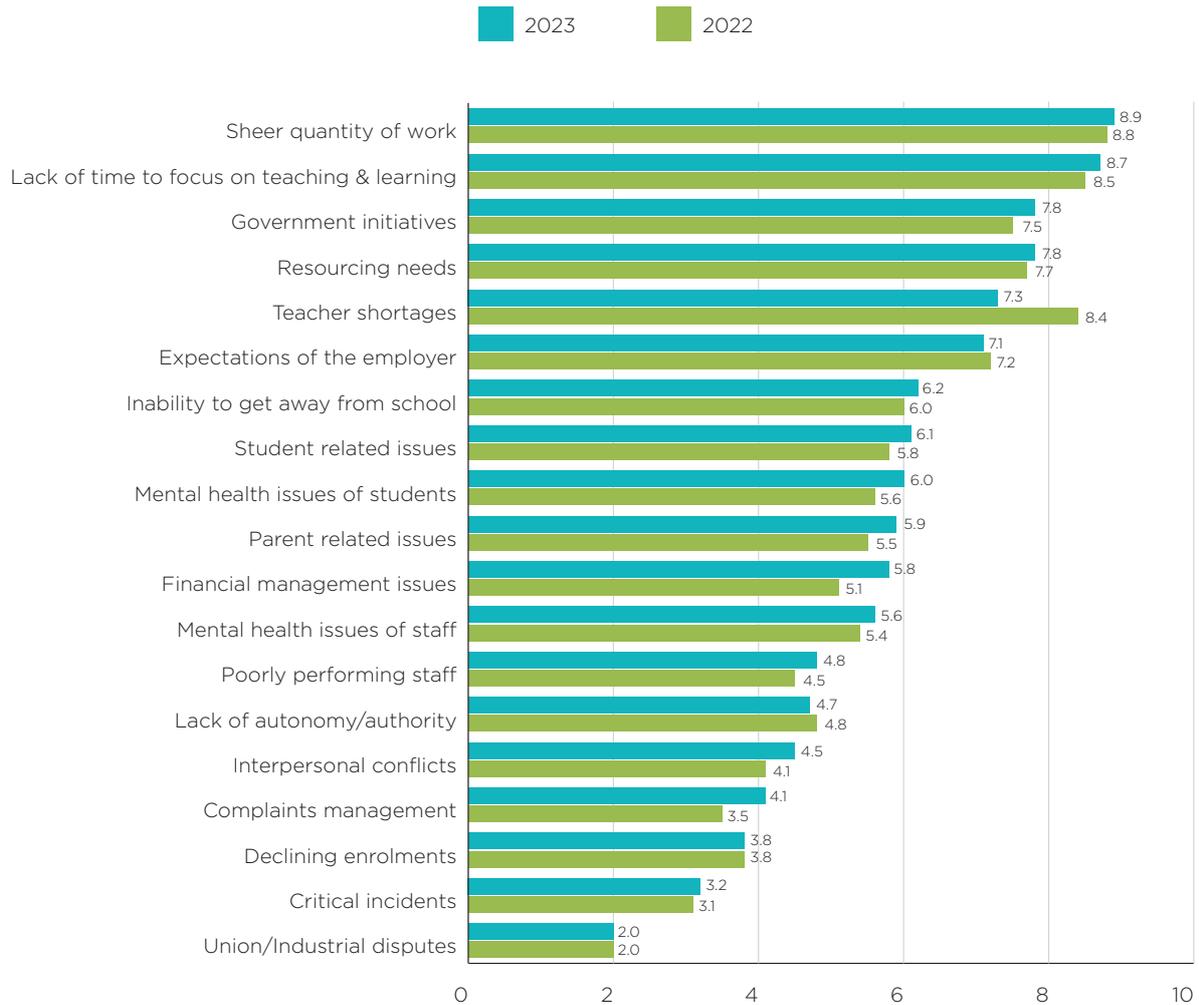
The table in the next column details how the negative health outcomes have deteriorated over time, both since the research was last conducted in Ireland in 2015 and over phases 1 and 2 of the latest iteration of the research. **The most elevated score and the one of most concern continues to be burnout.** The mean score is approaching 70, with **54% of primary school leaders now being identified as being within the severe or high categories of burnout.**

Comparison of Health & Wellbeing Outcomes (2015 v 2022 v 2023)

	2015	2022	2023
Burnout	57.6	66.1	69.2
Stress	49.6	51.5	54.6
Sleeping troubles	45.4	51.3	53.2
Depressive symptoms	33.5	36.0	39.4
Somatic stress	23.8	28.7	29.4
Cognitive stress	34.2	37.5	41.0

SOURCES OF STRESS

With regard to the Sources of Stress scores detailed below, **the top two sources of stress remain unchanged - Sheer quantity of work and Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning** - which tallies with the feedback from IPPN's member survey and our analysis of workload. These have been the top two sources of stress since 2015 but, in both cases, the mean stress score has increased since 2022. **Of the 19 identified sources of stress, the mean stress score has increased for 14 of them, stayed the same in two instances, and decreased in three.**



Comparison of sources of stress scores (2022 v 2023)

THE CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE RESEARCHERS

Arising from the trends observed by the researchers with regard to negative health and wellbeing outcomes and sources of stress, they conclude that

'This heightened workload and stress also show a significant negative impact on leaders' personal lives. The conditions are ripe for both heightened stress and burnout, calling for urgent interventions. It's clear that leaders need more consistent support, as well as the time and resources to fulfil their roles effectively. Given the current trends, mental health support could be a critical component for future initiatives aimed at stress and burnout reduction. The situation warrants immediate attention'.

Recommendations include:

- the **urgent need to reduce the workload** of school leaders
- the **development of a coherent framework to identify and assess the challenges leaders face** at work, especially in relation to emotional demands, work-life balance and mental health and wellbeing
- the **provision of individualised support to offer targeted solutions** including problem-solving approaches, emotional support strategies, or personalised coping mechanisms.

The research looked in detail at personal wellbeing (emotional, psychological and social) and professional wellbeing. In summary, primary school leaders scored 3.07 (out of 10), worse than their post-primary counterparts (3.35), and significantly worse than the General Population (4.25).

WELLBEING IN POST-COVID SCHOOLS: PRIMARY SCHOOL LEADERS' REIMAGINING OF THE FUTURE

In 2021, Burke and Dempsey Maynooth University, undertook research in order *'to identify wellbeing-related priorities and actions that can be taken in order to ensure the sustainability of school leadership and continuous enhancement of the school community's wellbeing post-Covid'*.

The research looked at what leaders like about their jobs, perceived stress and work-life balance, personal wellbeing, work-related wellbeing, personal 'ill-being', resilience, the impact of breaks on outcomes and the effect of the teaching vs administrative roles of the leaders.

Some of the key findings in this regard include:

- 8 out of 10 leaders experienced a lot of stress in the first term of the school year.
- While teaching leaders experienced less stress than administrative leaders, teaching leaders reported lower levels of personal wellbeing compared to administrative leaders.
- Leaders' stress was predicated by:
 - time pressure they experience
 - continuous interruptions
 - sourcing resources, e.g. SNAs, teacher allocation, space

- 6 out of 10 reported they do not have good work-life balance
- Not one leader was flourishing psychologically.

The research looked in detail at personal wellbeing (emotional, psychological and social) and professional wellbeing. In summary, primary school leaders scored 3.07 (out of 10), worse than their post-primary counterparts (3.35), and significantly worse than the General Population (4.25).

Burke and Dempsey highlight that *'Worryingly, approximately a quarter of the primary school principals began to experience an increased number of symptoms of depression, even though the number of symptoms do not yet reach the threshold of depression. If they are not addressed over the coming months, and action is not taken to alleviate their symptoms, school leaders' mental strain may persist and lead to diagnosable mental illness'*.

Having made recommendations at the Micro (School leaders), Meso (professional bodies) and Macro (Policy-makers) levels, they conclude that, *'it is crucial that primary school leaders' wellbeing is considered to ensure the sustainability of their roles'*.



Responsibility for the wellbeing of school leaders

From the research and comparative data, we can surmise that school leaders in general, and teaching principals in particular, are at risk of serious consequences for their health and well-being directly linked to their workload and work environment.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

It is undeniable that, as individuals, we have a responsibility to take steps to better ensure our personal health and wellbeing. Such steps include:

- ✓ maintaining our recommended body weight
- ✓ eating a balanced diet with moderate portions
- ✓ engaging in regular physical exercise
- ✓ prioritising healthy sleep habits
- ✓ not smoking or using drugs
- ✓ using alcohol in moderation
- ✓ taking steps to manage stress
- ✓ nurturing healthy personal relationships and
- ✓ finding meaning or purpose.

While these measures apply to life in general, school leaders also have both agency and responsibility to take steps to better ensure their wellbeing in the context of their leadership roles.

At the Pathways to Sustainable Leadership session during the principals' conference in November 2023 and at the Leadership Connections session during the deputy principals' conference in February 2024, school leaders identified a range of measures within their compass to implement which would improve the effectiveness and sustainability of their leadership roles. Those measures that relate to wellbeing include:

- creating good habits around having time to think, reflect and focus on teaching and learning
- ensuring that boundaries are created and respected
- acknowledging that there are things one cannot control
- recognising that being good enough is good enough
- prioritising one's self-care
- avoiding using the phrase 'leave it with me' when someone comes with a problem
- running your own race and not overthinking things
- remembering:
 - that whatever the current 'crisis' is, this too will pass and there will be something valuable to be learned from it
 - that some things don't need an immediate response and sometimes they don't need any response
 - not be so hard on or demanding of oneself
 - that it is a marathon and not a sprint and that not everything has to be done and it certainly doesn't have to be all done today
 - that it is ok to say that I don't know
 - that it is ok to say no
 - to recognise, enjoy and celebrate progress/success.

EMPLOYER RESPONSIBILITY

Employment legislation clearly identifies the duty of care that employers must exercise in relation to employees. The Health & Safety Authority (HSA) describes that duty of care as follows – *'Each employer has an obligation to ensure that, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health of employees is not endangered in the course of their work. Employers must ensure that the demands placed on employees while at work are reasonable'*

Furthermore the HSA identifies that ***'Stress which is constant and does not abate, but gets worse over time can lead to mental and physical health problems and illnesses'***. It is in this context that it asserts that ***'All employers are legally required to assess the working environment for systems and practices which lead to health and safety hazards, including stress, and to put in place preventive measures'***.

It is suggested that three levels of intervention are considered and that all three have a role to play in better ensuring employee wellbeing.

- **prevention** – which seeks to address the source of the issue
- **management** – which seeks to equip employees with the requisite skills and training to cope with work demands
- **minimisation** – which seeks to minimise the impact, where issues arise, through the provision of access to external supports or services such as an Employee Assistance Service (EAS).

In the case of schools, the Board of Management is the employer and we have clear evidence from the research of the impact that school leaders' workload and work environments is having on their physical and mental wellbeing. The data is sobering and highlights the need for urgent action. Boards have a responsibility to meet their duty of care to employees but find themselves placed in an almost impossible situation, as they have little control or influence over the extent of school leaders' workloads.

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE DE

As previously stated, school staff are employees of the Board of Management, with the Department of Education (DE) being the paymaster. However, it is the DE that stipulates and alters the terms and conditions of employment and the responsibilities that fall to school leaders. Such a situation compromises the Board's capacity to exercise its duty of care to its employees in that it does not control the role, responsibilities and consequential workload of school leaders.

Given the obvious and fundamental influence the DE has on the workload and work demands of all school personnel, it is clear that it also bears responsibility for addressing the impact that has on the wellbeing of those school personnel. The DE seeks to discharge this responsibility through the funding of and Employee Assistance Service (EAS), which is currently provided by Spectrum.Life.

múinteoir

M. Yvonne

Thug tú
eolas, misneach, grá, buíochas,
cabhair, muintín, scileanna agus
spreagadh dom.

≡ go raibh míle
maith agat ≡

What supports are currently in place?

The principal support for all school personnel, including school leaders, is the aforementioned EAS. According to the service provider's own literature, the EAS *'provides in-the-moment mental wellbeing support and advice to all school staff on a range of issues including wellbeing, bereavement, conflict and mediation, with short-term counselling also available. The EAS is a free, fully confidential service that supports school staff and their immediate families as they work through any personal or work-related concerns'*

Notwithstanding the fact that individual Boards of Management, patrons and management bodies may have particular supports in place to promote the wellbeing of school leaders, the EAS is the only support that is available to all school leaders as a matter of right.

What's happening elsewhere

The importance of school leader wellbeing is an issue that has been recognised, not just in Ireland, but also in jurisdictions across the world. Strategies and actions to impact positively on the wellbeing of school leaders range from tips to manage wellbeing on the websites of professional associations to frameworks, action plans and bespoke programmes targeting the enhancement of school leader wellbeing.

NORTHERN IRELAND

The National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) developed The Hub on its website *'as a central destination for advice, support and resources that encompass everything from management and curriculum, to advice around achieving a healthy balance within your own lifestyle and wellbeing'*

The particular webpage dedicated to this area, *School Leaders: a guide to your wellbeing*, includes the following elements:

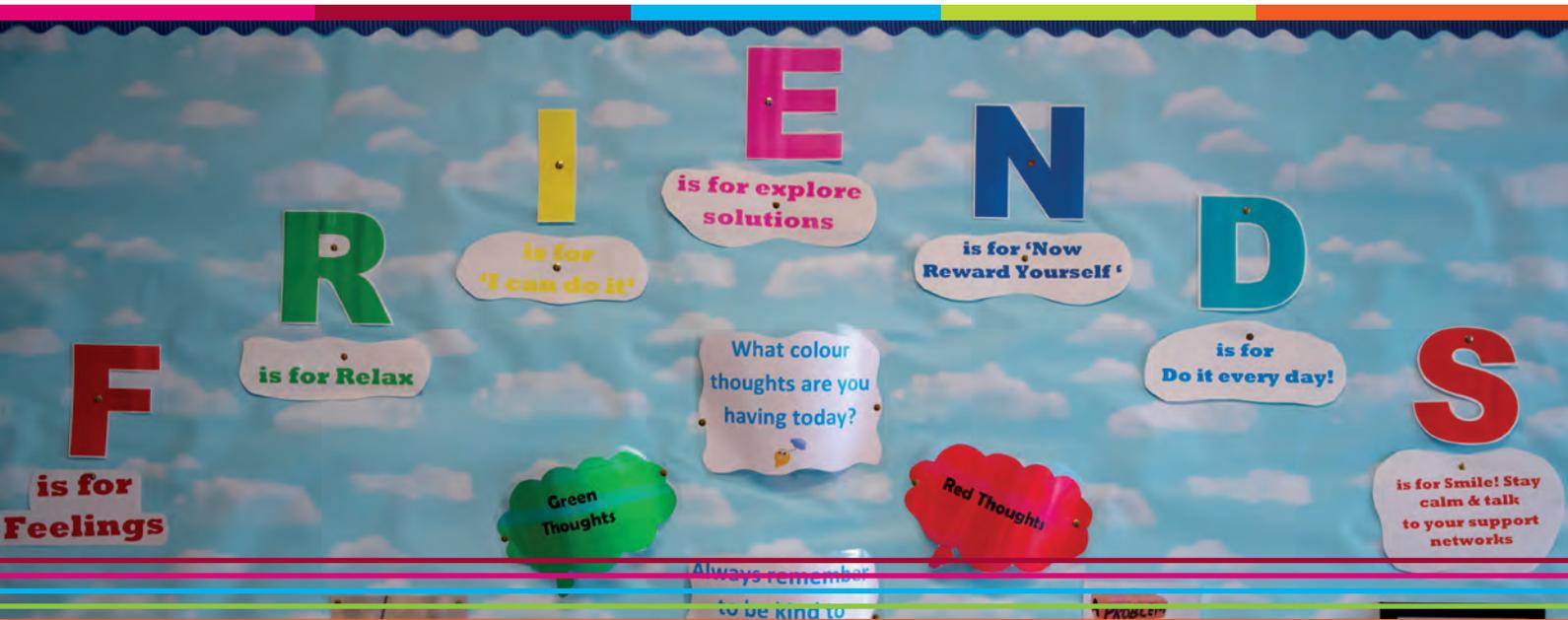
- *What does wellbeing mean to you?*
- *Are you entitled to wellbeing?*
- *Achieve your own wellbeing through others*
- *Wellbeing practices you can implement*
- *Tips to get control and the best out of your day*
- *Tips to get control and the best out of your week*
- *Tips to build resilience*
- *Wellbeing can't be bought off the shelf.*

AUSTRALIA

In February 2023, the Australian Primary Principals' Association (APPA) and the Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA) jointly published a report entitled - *School Leader Wellbeing - Supporting school leaders to flourish.*

The report summarises the policy positions adopted in four of the eight Australian states / territories:

- the Principal Wellbeing Framework (2019) developed in the Northern Territory
- the Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2020) developed in Queensland
- the Principal Wellbeing Action Plan (2019) developed in Tasmania
- the Principal Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2021 developed in Victoria.



The report also details research commissioned by APPA & ASPA into the various domains of wellbeing and eight factors or domains are identified, which are:

1. Self-efficacy
2. Enjoyment
3. Connectedness
4. Autonomy
5. Positive emotional affect
6. Supportive school environment
7. Meaning & purpose
8. Self-care.

While a school leader wellbeing policy position or framework could not be found in the public domain for New South Wales, a bespoke programme, *the Flourish Movement*, was developed by a partnership of researchers and the New South Wales Principals' Association in 2016. The stated aim of the programme is to improve the wellbeing and effectiveness of school leaders by *'enhancing leadership capabilities while prioritizing personal wellbeing, therefore creating a positive balance between professional excellence and personal satisfaction'*.

The four themes explored over the course of the Flourish Movement programme are:

1. Physical Wellbeing & Recovery
2. Job Effectiveness & Workflow
3. Emotional Wellbeing and Adaptability
4. Alignment to Vision & Purpose.

CANADA

In its strategic plan published in November 2023, the British Columbia Principals' and Vice Principals' Association (BCPVPA) identifies the provision of the supports and resources required to maintain and improve the overall wellbeing of Principals and Vice-Principals as one of its five stated goals.

While it seeks to provide such supports and resources via a range of strategies including access to coaching and counselling support through an early intervention programme, BCPVPA employs on its senior staff a Director of Member Health & Wellbeing who offers direct support to members on issues relating to occupational health & wellbeing.

Resources on the BCPVPA website related to wellbeing also include:

- ReFresh – a series which shares practical information and simple exercises that can help to create balance in the day, and offer the brief, mindful breaks that are needed to build and maintain resilience
- ReCharge – a health series launched to help members to renew their energy, enhance their fortitude, and build up their coping competency through a focus on identifying specific coping skills or components of self-awareness.
- The Learning Brain – a series of tips, links, and self-assessment tools to aid better understanding of the mental health continuum.



What IPPN is progressing now to improve role sustainability and wellbeing

School leadership is meaningful, important and impactful work that can lead to personal and professional fulfilment. The wellbeing of school leaders is central to the realisation of their full leadership potential, which has a consequential positive impact on school effectiveness and the wellbeing of the whole school community. However, the current reality of primary school leadership directly compromises the wellbeing of school leaders.

IPPN believes that the implementation of the recommendations in its Sustainable Leadership report would have a profound impact on leadership capacity, effectiveness and sustainability and, therefore, lead to enhanced levels of wellbeing among school leaders. Accordingly, IPPN has made specific proposals to the DE, as follows.

GREATER ROLE CLARITY FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

It is imperative that the 'conducive conditions' are created that will empower the leadership agency required to deliver the most effective schools. Central to that process will be reaching consensus on what it is that we want our school leaders to be doing in their role. That role clarity needs to be shaped around the behaviours of effective school leaders, many of which are evident within the standards in the Quality Framework for Leadership and Management.

IPPN believes that the quality framework can be used not just as a means of evaluating leadership practice, but also as a basis for establishing a shared understanding of what constitutes effective school leadership and where school leaders should be spending their time. It can also serve to ensure

...it is IPPN's contention that the leadership and management of our primary schools must be a shared responsibility.

a more balanced practice of the twin dimensions of leadership and management, as both are required to ensure school effectiveness.

Accordingly, IPPN has developed a Leadership Effectiveness Discussion document, based on the domains and standards of the quality framework, which details the tasks/actions associated with the achievement of those standards with a view to establishing who is best placed to undertake such actions. A further version of the document has been developed as a reflection tool for those involved in the leadership and management of our schools. We believe that engagement with these documents by stakeholders and practitioners will help to move towards greater role clarity and leadership effectiveness.

MORE DISCRETE TIME FOR LEADERSHIP IN ALL SCHOOLS

Given the sheer breadth of tasks and actions that derive from the domains and standards of the Quality Framework (as detailed in IPPN's Role Clarity Discussion Document), it is IPPN's contention that the leadership and management of our primary schools must be a shared responsibility. All those who have such responsibility must be given sufficient

capacity, in terms of time, to be able to discharge that responsibility effectively.

The greatest impediment to the effective leadership of our schools is identified as a lack of time due to the teaching commitments of the deputy principal and/or the principal. 84% of deputy principals and 78% of principals cite this lack of time as an impediment, which is understandable given that 54% of principals are teaching principals and 97% of deputy principals have full-time teaching duties.

In addition, the current approach to allocating leadership time to primary schools lacks flexibility and is characterised by thresholds and cliff edges. IPPN believes that a graduated, more nuanced approach is urgently needed.

Accordingly, IPPN has proposed a model of allocating more discrete leadership time to all schools based on the size of the school. The model proposes that teaching principals would receive an increasing number of leadership and management days and that those schools with administrative principals would receive an allocation of leadership and management days to the deputy principals.

Band	Enrolment	Status of Principal	Status of Deputy Principal	Number of schools
1	1 - 84	0.4 admin (2 days a week)	Full-time teaching	1002
2	85 - 168	0.6 admin (3 days a week)	Full-time teaching	821
3	169 - 372	Fully admin	0.4 admin (2 days a week)	871
4	373 - 572	Fully admin	0.6 admin (3 days a week)	308
5	573 +	Fully admin	Fully admin	87
				3089

This proposed model details an increased allocation of leadership time to either principals or deputy principals, in accordance with the size of the school. However, it should be noted that schools would have the flexibility to use that increased allocation of leadership time to free up the most relevant person to progress what has been prioritised by the school - the principal, deputy principal, an assistant principal, or another member of the teaching staff. This would have a significant and positive impact on the sharing of leadership and the development of leadership capacity.

GREATER CAPACITY TO SHARE LEADERSHIP

Moving from a hierarchical, duties-focused approach to the more inclusive culture of the shared leadership and management of our schools, where the contributions of all are valued and celebrated, is imperative. Such a culture needs to be developed first before it can be embedded. This process is at a more advanced stage within the post-primary sector than it is within the primary sector.

In the Middle Leadership Action Research project, commissioned by the Centre for School Leadership, the participating schools identified access to and structured support from a trained facilitator as the single most important contributory factor to the increased leadership capacity and more effective sharing of leadership in their schools.

It is in this context that IPPN believes that greater access to and engagement with team coaching would have a profoundly positive impact on the development of a shared leadership culture in our schools.

Certain impediments exist to schools accessing the team coaching facility offered now through the Oide Leadership section. As it stands, only schools where the principal has availed of four one-to-one coaching sessions are able to apply for access to team coaching. This disadvantages schools where the principal, for whatever reason, does not wish to engage with one-to-one coaching. The impact is clear, with fewer than 5% of schools (primary and post-primary) having completed team coaching as of the end of 2023.

IPPN has proposed that this barrier to accessing team coaching be removed, and that the following modifications be made:

- Allow all schools to apply for access to team coaching regardless of whether the principal has engaged with one-to-one coaching
- Increase the number of team coaching sessions from 4 to 8
- Use the first two sessions for the principal, deputy principal and coach to establish an understanding of the needs of the school and what they wish to achieve
- Allow all members of the leadership and management team to attend (restricting it to 6 people will be exclusive and less effective in schools where there are more than 6 members of the leadership management team).

A GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE THAT HAS THE CAPACITY TO DISCHARGE ITS ONEROUS RESPONSIBILITIES

Over the last 13 years, IPPN has consistently highlighted its concerns about the appropriateness of the current Board of Management governance structure in our schools. Society is indebted to the volunteers who serve, or have served, on our boards and the selfless community service they have provided over the last 50 years. However, it is unreasonable and unfair to expect volunteers to continue to discharge the increasingly complex and onerous statutory and legislative responsibilities that fall to Boards of Management.

In the absence of appropriate support and direct access to relevant expertise, the lack of capacity of Boards to adequately discharge their governance function has been identified as a significant contributory factor to the increased workload of school leaders and the diminishing sustainability of their roles. Furthermore, standards of governance are compromised which has significant implications for schools, their patrons, the education system and wider society, not to mention children.

It is in this context that IPPN advocates for review and reform of the governance of our schools.

Underlying Principles

In order to ensure that there are no misconceptions in relation to IPPN's vision for the governance of our schools, the following underlying principles are offered.

Any proposed model of school governance must:

- respect and protect the ethos of schools, whatever that ethos may be
- retain the element of local stakeholder involvement
- be buttressed by ready access to relevant expertise and services
- uphold the principles of good governance and the standards of the Charities Regulator.

Enhancing Current Governance Practice

Mindful of the issues previously detailed with regard to the capacity of the current Board of Management structure to meet the governance demands of our schools, it is imperative that ways to enhance current governance practice are explored. IPPN proposes two ways of doing this:

1. Piloting the role of an Administrative/Compliance Officer within the confines of the Small Schools Action Research Project
2. Piloting clustered access to shared services (HR, Finance, Legal, etc.).

In keeping with the Minister's reference to the potential of the Small Schools project to offer some insight and ideas for how Boards may be supported, it was agreed that it might be possible to use the project to explore different supports for governance,



as long as they complied with the provisions of the governance manual. It was in this context that an Administrative Officer role was devised. The role was designed to support the leadership of a cluster of schools in the area of administration in order to allow them to better focus on the leadership of teaching and learning. The suggestion was that this role could be expanded to include a focus on supporting some compliance elements of the Board's work.

Accordingly, IPPN has proposed that:

- a second phase or iteration of the research project be sanctioned to run until June 2026 as it is due to finish in June 2024 (*it should be noted that in May 2024, the Minister sanctioned a second phase of the project to run until June 2026*)
- a role specification for an Administrative/ Compliance Officer, designed to support school leadership and enhance governance, would be agreed
- each cluster participating in the second phase of the research project would be given the opportunity to avail of the support of an Administrative/Compliance Officer, should they wish to do so
- an independent evaluation of the impact of the role be undertaken in quarter 2 of 2026.

The legal, financial, human resource, health & safety, and child protection compliance responsibilities of Boards, are both significant and onerous. Such compliance can only be assured when specific and relevant expertise is readily available to schools. The involvement of local stakeholders in the governance structure, who are invested in the school community, needs to be buttressed by access to professional expertise/services.

Accordingly, IPPN has proposed that:

- a cohort of schools be identified who would be willing to participate in a cluster who had access to such services on a pilot basis
- the cohort of schools identified includes schools of varying size, context, etc., to ensure that it is a representative sample
- an independent evaluation of the impact of clustered access to professional services be undertaken in quarter 2 of 2026.

Determining what governance structure would best meet the needs of schools into the future

IPPN maintains an open mind as to what the most appropriate governance structure for Irish schools would look like. We also anticipate that the rich learnings that would emanate from the proposals made previously, if enacted, would help to shape and inform the system's consideration of alternative governance structures.

The Primary Education Forum has been identified by the Minister as '*a platform for discussion.... as to what the future governance arrangements for schools might look like*'. Given that all of the primary education partners are represented around the Forum table, it makes sense for it to be used to ensure progress on this issue. However, as the Forum meets only three times a year, meaningful momentum and progress would be difficult to achieve.

Accordingly, IPPN has proposed that:

- a working group be established from the membership of the Forum
- the working group should be tasked with facilitating collaborative engagement with a view to the development of discussion papers for the consideration of the wider membership of the Forum
- progress reports delivered by the working group at each meeting of the Forum
- a target date of June 2026 be agreed for the finalisation of proposals for governance reform.

While the achievement of these priorities is being progressed, we must also remain cognisant of the research findings relating to the health and wellbeing of Irish school leaders. The data illustrates the inexorable and worrying increases in the scores for negative health outcomes, with the elevated burnout scores being of particular concern.

There is a shared responsibility among school leaders, employers and policy-makers to prioritise actions that will have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of school leaders in the immediate future.

Recommendations

School leaders should:

- reflect on the practice of leadership in their school – IPPN’s leadership reflection tool which can be accessed [here](#)
- take small, practical steps to better ensure their own personal health and wellbeing
- take small, practical steps to better ensure a healthier work/life balance
- actively disconnect from work at the end of the working day
- ensure that boundaries are created and respected
- ensure that they take proper breaks from school during holiday periods
- prioritise their own self-care
- seek advice from IPPN’s leadership support team whenever they may need it
- seek the support of colleagues by joining a local support group of school leaders (if they are not already in one)
- share the leadership workload as widely as they have capacity to do so.

Boards of Management should:

- be aware of their responsibilities and duty of care to their employees specifically with regard to health and wellbeing
- conduct a risk assessment to identify workload hazards such as work-related stress, anxiety and burnout
- provide practical supports to school leaders to ensure workloads are manageable and that the work environment safeguards wellbeing.

IPPN should:

- continue to progress the advocacy work on the priorities established within the Sustainable Leadership project
- design and deliver professional development for school leaders in the area of identifying and maintaining agreed priorities
- develop and provide bespoke support(s) for school leader wellbeing
- ensure ongoing monitoring of the sustainability of school leadership roles
- ensure ongoing monitoring of school leader health and wellbeing.

The Department of Education should:

- collaborate with IPPN and the other education partners to alleviate the workload of school leaders and the related negative impact on their health and wellbeing by
 - establishing greater clarity with regard to the roles and responsibilities of school leaders
 - allocating more discrete leadership time to all schools
 - ensuring there is greater capacity to share leadership
 - identifying the most appropriate governance structure for primary schools
 - assessing the likely impact on workload of any new initiative before that initiative is implemented
 - consulting with the Primary Education Forum in this regard, in accordance with its terms of reference
 - reviewing the impact of the implementation of such initiatives to identify if the pre-implementation assessment was accurate
 - ensuring greater coherence and communication between the different sections of the Department with regard to their interactions with and their demands of schools
- evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the Employee Assistance Service.





CONTACT US

We are keen to hear from school leaders and any other stakeholders who share our vision for primary education. You can contact us through one of the media below.

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More information about IPPN and the supports and services we offer to school leaders is available on our website www.ippn.ie.

Charitable Status

IPPN is a non-profit organisation and a registered charity with CHY number 17221