



**Submission to the Review of the Wellbeing Policy
Statement and Framework for Practice (2019)**

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Introduction

The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review of the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2019)*.

IPPN strongly supported the publication of the Framework, which established wellbeing as a central component of children's educational experience and recognised schools as key environments for promoting positive wellbeing outcomes. The Framework appropriately emphasises a whole-school approach, recognising the importance of school culture, relationships, learning experiences, leadership and system supports in fostering wellbeing.

Since its publication, a substantial body of Irish and international research has reinforced the Framework's core principles. The evidence consistently demonstrates that wellbeing is shaped by the quality of relationships, a sense of belonging, inclusion, engagement in learning and access to appropriate supports. At the same time, research highlights the increasing complexity of needs within school communities and the growing demands being placed on schools, teachers and school leaders.

IPPN believes the review presents an important opportunity to build on the strengths of the existing Framework while addressing implementation challenges that have emerged over recent years. **Future wellbeing policy must recognise that positive wellbeing outcomes for pupils are dependent upon coherent supports across education, health and social care systems and upon the sustainability of the workforce responsible for delivering those outcomes.**

The evidence also points to a fundamental interdependence between pupil wellbeing, staff wellbeing and school leader wellbeing. Sustainable progress in any one of these areas depends upon sustained progress in the others. A revised Framework should therefore adopt an explicit whole-system approach that recognises wellbeing as a shared responsibility across schools, families, communities and public services.

Pupil Wellbeing

The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2019)* sets out a clear vision that wellbeing is integral to learning and school life and is shaped by school culture, relationships, teaching and learning, and system-level supports. The Framework appropriately recognises schools as key protective environments for children and young people, while acknowledging that wellbeing is influenced by a broader range of societal, family and community factors.

IPPEN strongly supports this whole-school approach. Irish and international evidence consistently demonstrates that positive wellbeing outcomes are associated with strong relationships, a sense of belonging, meaningful participation in learning and access to appropriate supports. However, successful implementation requires that policy commitments are matched by coherent, integrated and adequately resourced systems of support.

Culture, Relationships and Belonging

The Framework identifies culture, relationships and belonging as central to wellbeing promotion. Recent Irish research, including ESRI studies, highlights that school culture, positive relationships and a strong sense of belonging are fundamental to student wellbeing, engagement and inclusion. This is particularly important for children who may experience disadvantage, exclusion or additional educational needs.

International evidence similarly reinforces the importance of school climate. OECD research consistently identifies positive school environments and supportive relationships as among the strongest predictors of student wellbeing, engagement and educational participation.

Schools play a critical role in creating inclusive environments where children feel safe, respected, connected and valued. The promotion of belonging and positive relationships should remain a central pillar of the revised Framework.

Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

The Framework highlights the role of curriculum, physical activity, arts, play and nutrition in supporting wellbeing. Irish research consistently identifies primary schools as important settings for promoting wellbeing through active learning, creativity, play, movement and positive learning experiences.

The ESRI has highlighted the significant contribution of physical activity, arts education, play-based approaches and inclusive learning environments to children's wellbeing and

development. These findings align strongly with international research, which demonstrates that active engagement in learning contributes positively to social, emotional and cognitive development.

The implementation of the Primary Curriculum Framework presents an important opportunity to strengthen these connections. However, wellbeing-promoting curriculum experiences must be adequately protected and resourced if their benefits are to be sustained.

Early Intervention and Access to Supports

The Framework recognises the importance of timely support and a continuum of provision ranging from universal wellbeing promotion to targeted and specialist interventions.

Research evidence consistently demonstrates that early intervention improves outcomes for children experiencing emotional, behavioural or developmental difficulties. Conversely, delays in accessing appropriate assessments, therapeutic supports and specialist services can lead to deterioration in outcomes.

Schools are increasingly supporting children with complex and diverse needs. While schools play a vital role in promoting wellbeing and identifying concerns at an early stage, they cannot replace specialist health and therapeutic services.

The distinction between universal school-based wellbeing promotion and specialist clinical intervention should therefore be more clearly articulated within future policy.

Policy, Planning and System Coherence

The Framework emphasises the importance of coherent policy and planning in supporting wellbeing. Research evidence and school experience consistently indicate that system fragmentation can limit the effectiveness of wellbeing supports.

OECD and Irish research highlight that successful wellbeing promotion depends on strong collaboration across education, health and social care systems, clarity regarding roles and responsibilities, and coordinated service delivery.

A whole-system approach is therefore essential. **Schools require access to responsive external supports and clear pathways for referral and intervention. Equally, policy expectations must be aligned with available capacity and resources.**

Meaningful pupil participation should also remain a key feature of future policy development. Consistent with the principles of the Framework and international best

practice, children and young people should have opportunities to contribute to the design, implementation and evaluation of wellbeing initiatives that affect them.

IPPN Recommendations

IPPN recommends that the revised Framework:

- continue to prioritise inclusive school cultures that promote belonging, equity, participation and positive relationships
- adequately resource whole-school wellbeing approaches, including restorative practices, positive behaviour frameworks and wellbeing promotion initiatives
- provide practical support to schools in responding to increasing diversity and complexity of pupil needs
- protect and adequately resource curriculum areas that support wellbeing, including Physical Education, arts education and play-based learning
- ensure that wellbeing-related curriculum initiatives are supported through sustained professional learning and implementation support
- avoid curriculum overload and ensure coherence between wellbeing policy and curriculum reform
- strengthen integrated working between education, health and social care services to ensure timely and coordinated support for children and families
- expand access to early intervention and preventative services through multidisciplinary models linked to schools or school clusters
- reduce waiting times for assessment, therapeutic and specialist intervention services
- clearly distinguish between the universal wellbeing role of schools and the responsibilities of specialist clinical services
- improve coordination and continuity of support between schools and external agencies
- introduce greater system-level assessment of implementation demands placed on schools, and
- ensure meaningful pupil participation in the development, implementation and evaluation of wellbeing policy and practice.

Staff Wellbeing

The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2019)* explicitly recognises the wellbeing of school personnel as a protective factor in supporting positive outcomes for children and young people. This reflects an important principle: staff wellbeing is not separate from pupil wellbeing but is a foundational element of it.

IPPN strongly supports this principle. However, evidence emerging since the publication of the Framework indicates that sustained attention to staff wellbeing is now required if the ambitions of the Framework are to be fully realised.

Staff Wellbeing as a System Enabler of Pupil Wellbeing

International research consistently demonstrates a strong relationship between teacher wellbeing and student outcomes. OECD research highlights that teacher job satisfaction, stress levels and working conditions are associated with classroom climate, student engagement and overall school effectiveness.

In the Irish context, the DCU CREATE Teacher Occupational Wellbeing Research (2025) found exceptionally high levels of burnout among teachers, with workload, administrative requirements, increasing complexity of pupil needs and growing external expectations identified as major contributors to stress.

These findings reinforce the need to view staff wellbeing not simply as an individual concern but as a critical enabler of effective wellbeing promotion across the school community.

Workload, Work Design and System Pressures

Research evidence consistently identifies workload intensity, administrative burden and increasing role complexity as significant contributors to staff stress and reduced wellbeing.

While schools are committed to supporting pupil wellbeing, implementation expectations must be matched by adequate capacity and resources. Wellbeing initiatives cannot simply be layered onto already stretched workloads.

Workplace Culture and Professional Support

Research consistently shows that supportive leadership, collegial relationships, trust and psychologically safe working environments are among the strongest protective factors for staff wellbeing.

A positive school culture benefits both staff and pupils. Schools where staff feel supported, valued and professionally trusted are better positioned to foster positive learning environments and meaningful wellbeing outcomes.

Access to Supports and Early Intervention

Individual supports such as the Employee Assistance Service provide valuable assistance to school personnel. However, occupational wellbeing research consistently demonstrates that individual-level supports are most effective when combined with organisational approaches that address underlying causes of stress.

IPPN Recommendations

IPPN recommends that the revised Framework:

- explicitly recognise staff wellbeing as a prerequisite for effective pupil wellbeing promotion
- strengthen whole-school wellbeing approaches that include structured supports for staff as well as pupils
- address workload pressures arising from administrative, compliance and reporting requirements
- introduce wellbeing and workload impact assessments for all new policies, initiatives and programmes
- review the cumulative implementation demands placed on schools to ensure alignment with available capacity and resources
- promote positive school cultures characterised by trust, collaboration, professional autonomy and supportive leadership
- embed wellbeing, resilience and mental health literacy within initial teacher education and continuing professional learning
- continue to provide and enhance confidential wellbeing supports, including counselling and early intervention services
- regularly evaluate the effectiveness, accessibility and uptake of staff wellbeing supports, including the Employee Assistance Service, and
- ensure implementation expectations are proportionate to staffing, leadership capacity and available resources.

School Leader Wellbeing

The Framework recognises school leaders as central to the development of positive school culture and the successful implementation of whole-school wellbeing approaches. However, Irish and international evidence indicates that school leader wellbeing is under increasing pressure.

School Leadership as a Driver of Whole-School Wellbeing

School leaders shape school culture, staff wellbeing and student outcomes. OECD research highlights the strong relationship between effective leadership, positive school climate and educational outcomes.

The success of any future wellbeing strategy will depend on the capacity and wellbeing of those responsible for leading its implementation.

Evidence on Workload, Stress and Burnout

IPPN's Sustainable Leadership research, undertaken in partnership with Deakin University, found significantly elevated levels of stress, burnout, sleep disruption and cognitive strain among Irish school leaders compared with population norms.

Workload, lack of time and increasing administrative demands were consistently identified as the primary sources of stress.

System Pressures and Role Expansion

School leaders are increasingly required to manage governance, administration, compliance, wellbeing, safeguarding, curriculum implementation and engagement with multiple external agencies.

Research consistently demonstrates that administrative demands and policy implementation requirements are displacing time for educational leadership and contributing to unsustainable workload patterns.

Wellbeing Supports and System Responsibility

While services such as the Employee Assistance Service provide valuable support, research demonstrates that individual interventions alone are insufficient if underlying systemic pressures remain unaddressed.

Supporting school leader wellbeing requires action on workload, role clarity, leadership capacity and policy coherence.

IPPN Recommendations

IPPN recommends that the revised Framework:

- explicitly recognise school leader wellbeing as a prerequisite for successful implementation of the Wellbeing Framework
- conduct a systematic review of leadership roles and responsibilities to ensure sustainability
- reduce administrative and compliance burdens that do not directly contribute to teaching, learning or pupil wellbeing
- increase protected leadership and management time
- strengthen distributed leadership structures
- introduce formal wellbeing and workload impact assessments for all new policies and initiatives
- improve coordination across Department divisions and external agencies
- maintain and enhance access to wellbeing supports while complementing them with preventative organisational measures, and
- establish mechanisms for monitoring school leader wellbeing over time.

Primary Curriculum Framework and Wellbeing

The Primary Curriculum Framework presents a significant opportunity to strengthen wellbeing promotion by ensuring that wellbeing is embedded across all areas of learning rather than treated as a discrete curriculum component.

Wellbeing Through Teaching and Learning

Research consistently demonstrates that wellbeing and learning are mutually reinforcing. Engagement, belonging, participation and positive learning experiences contribute significantly to children's wellbeing and educational achievement.

The Framework's emphasis on competencies, learner agency, play-based learning, physical activity, creativity, arts education and integrated learning aligns strongly with this evidence base.

Curriculum Design and Wellbeing Promotion

Research shows that opportunities for physical activity, artistic expression, active learning and social interaction contribute positively to resilience, confidence and wellbeing.

At the same time, evidence indicates that overly content-heavy curricula and excessive assessment demands can negatively impact both pupil and staff wellbeing.

Implementation Capacity and System Coherence

Successful implementation will depend on more than curriculum design. **Curriculum reform requires adequate time for planning, collaboration, professional learning and reflection, alongside appropriate staffing and leadership capacity.**

There is a strong interdependency between pupil wellbeing, staff wellbeing and school leader wellbeing in curriculum implementation. Curriculum change is most effective when educators have sufficient time, autonomy and support to engage meaningfully with reform.

Alignment Between Curriculum Reform and Wellbeing Policy

The review of the Wellbeing Framework and implementation of the Primary Curriculum Framework provide an important opportunity to strengthen policy coherence.

Schools require clear expectations, realistic implementation timelines and consistency across policy areas to ensure curriculum reform supports, rather than competes with, wellbeing priorities.

IPPN Recommendations

IPPN recommends that the revised Framework:

- explicitly embed wellbeing as a core principle across all areas of the Primary Curriculum Framework
- maintain a strong emphasis on pedagogies that support wellbeing, including play-based learning, creativity and collaboration
- ensure strong alignment between curriculum reform and the Wellbeing Framework
- avoid duplication of initiatives that increase workload without clear benefit
- provide sustained professional learning and implementation support
- ensure adequate time for collaboration, planning and professional reflection
- protect curriculum time for physical activity, arts education, play and relationship-based learning
- avoid curriculum overload
- match curriculum reform with appropriate staffing, leadership capacity and resourcing
- introduce wellbeing and workload impact assessments as part of curriculum implementation and review, and
- monitor the impact of curriculum reform on pupil engagement, staff wellbeing, leadership wellbeing and school sustainability.

Conclusion

The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2019)* has provided a strong foundation for promoting wellbeing in Irish schools. Its emphasis on relationships, belonging, inclusion, participation and whole-school culture remains strongly supported by Irish and international research.

The evidence emerging since 2019 demonstrates, however, that wellbeing outcomes are fundamentally system dependent. Schools play a vital role in promoting wellbeing, but they cannot deliver positive outcomes in isolation. Sustainable progress requires coherent policy, coordinated service delivery, adequate resourcing and realistic implementation expectations.

IPPN believes that the next phase of wellbeing policy should adopt an explicitly whole-system approach that recognises the interconnected nature of pupil wellbeing, staff wellbeing and school leader wellbeing. It should also ensure strong alignment between wellbeing policy, curriculum reform and implementation capacity.

Specifically, meaningful progress requires:

- integrated and responsive supports for children and families
- sustained investment in staff wellbeing and professional capacity
- urgent attention to school leader workload, sustainability and retention
- stronger coordination across education, health and social care services
- alignment between curriculum reform, wellbeing policy and available implementation capacity, and
- ongoing evaluation of workload and wellbeing impacts associated with new policy initiatives.

Without greater coherence across policy, services and resources, expectations placed on schools will continue to outpace capacity, undermining the wellbeing outcomes that the Framework seeks to achieve.

A renewed Framework should therefore place equal emphasis on pupil wellbeing, staff wellbeing, leadership sustainability and system coherence as the foundations for successful and sustainable wellbeing promotion in Irish schools.