



IPPN

PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2018

Prepared for: the Minister for Education and Skills  
and the Minister for Finance

Prepared by: Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN)

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## INTRODUCTION

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The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. Established in 1999, IPPN is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary organisation with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education and Skills as an official Education Partner, IPPN works with the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the National Parents' Council, management bodies, unions, education agencies, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,400 Principals and Deputy Principals, leading Ireland's 3,200+ primary schools.

While IPPN acknowledges the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019, it is felt that the content of the strategy document does not go far enough to highlight requirements at primary level.

IPPN consulted our members and, having received over 1300 responses – representing 40% of all schools – has identified the top principals' priorities for the primary education sector. We present the following as IPPN's stated priorities for Budget 2018 in relation to primary education.

1. Minimum of one administration day per week for Teaching Principals.
2. Restore Middle Leadership posts.
3. Revise the Staffing Schedule for Special Schools.
4. Increase the Capitation Grant.
5. Dignified step-down facility for principals.
6. Reduce the threshold for Administrative Principalship.
7. Emotional Wellbeing in the school community.
8. Improve the pupil/teacher ratio.
9. Information Technology and Digital Learning in Schools.

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## 1. MINIMUM OF ONE ADMINISTRATION DAY PER WEEK FOR TEACHING PRINCIPALS

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In the Irish primary school system, 60% of principals (close to 2,000) are Teaching Principals. Teaching Principals have two roles to fulfil. They have full-time duties as teachers, more often than not teaching in multi-grade settings and they also have full-time roles as school principals. They have an assigned number of 'administrative days' (from the 2016/17 school year) as set out below:

- Principal + 5/6 Teachers: 25 days
- Principal + 3/4 teachers: 20 days
- Principal + 0/1/2 teachers: 15 days.

It is important to note that the number of teachers counted for the calculation of administrative days refers to mainstream class teachers only. It does not take into account additional support and ancillary staff such as learning support teachers, resource teachers, special class teachers, special needs assistants, ancillary staff or bus escorts. These additional staff members add huge value to each school but also result in additional duties for the Teaching Principal as all staff must be managed, led and supported.

The current situation is unsustainable and numerous IPPN studies confirm this. Teaching Principals have the poorest infrastructure (38% have no personal office space or dedicated storage – 2016 survey finding) and the least ancillary staff support despite the fact that they are teaching full time and desperately need full-time secretarial support.

IPPN recommends that the DES rescind Circular 0025/2002. In its place, a new circular recognising the emphasis in the Education Act (1998) on the learning, developmental, consultative and leadership aspects of the role of the principal should be published. This circular should provide:

- a) a minimum of one administration day per week for all Teaching Principals, to be taken at their own discretion with approval from the Board of Management
- b) provide for the establishment of a national panel of qualified substitute teachers allocated to clusters of schools - to ensure adequate and consistent cover for Teaching Principals' administration days
- c) provide for adequate administrative support for Teaching Principals.

There is significant evidence that the quality of leadership in schools impacts directly on the quality of learning of pupils. There is evidence that lack of time and inadequate administrative supports to deal effectively with workload are barriers that prevent Teaching Principals from spending 'quality time' on their leadership function and there is evidence that this is having a particularly negative effect on the health of 60% of primary school leaders. It is IPPN's belief that this situation is no longer sustainable. Introducing a minimum of one administration day per week would help ease the burden on Teaching Principals and would signal serious intent on the part of the Department to address the serious problems highlighted for many years by IPPN and other education partners in relation to their role.

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## 2. RESTORE MIDDLE LEADERSHIP POSTS

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Principals' work overload is a well-documented issue at this stage, with numerous surveys confirming that the role is unsustainable without an appropriate middle leadership structure in place. The moratorium on Middle Leadership posts disproportionately affected schools with senior staff members who retired not being replaced. Many schools have lost their entire management team, with the exception of the Deputy Principal post. Middle Leadership would have a significant role in the ongoing school self-evaluation process, mentoring of new staff and in larger schools manage communications for subsets of the school's student population.

The delegation of duties and areas of responsibility to the Deputy Principal, Assistant Principal and special duties teachers is central to the effective functioning of any school. It provides a very necessary support for Principals in carrying out their role. In this context, IPPN considers, in particular, that:

- The Principal's role as instructional leader may necessitate delegating particular areas of the curriculum to curriculum leaders / co-ordinators
- Some of the day-to-day management and administration tasks of the school must be delegated to the middle leadership team
- The middle leadership structure should be tasked with relieving the Principal of substantial administration and communications responsibilities, as the post holders will be responsible for these aspects of their particular areas of responsibility.

IPPN is calling for an urgent review of Middle Leadership capacity. This is an opportune time to commence the rebuilding of leadership and management teams in schools.

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### 3. REVISE THE STAFFING SCHEDULE FOR SPECIAL SCHOOLS

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The Special Schools' Staffing Schedule was last updated in 1993 (the SERC report) and urgently requires attention.

The Pupil Teacher Ratios (PTRs) listed in the previous SERC report are totally out of date with the reality of the complexity of the needs of the pupils now enrolled in special schools. Schools for children with severe and profound intellectual and physical disabilities in particular are in crisis. Almost all pupils attending special schools now have very complex multi-disciplinary needs. Those who can manage in mainstream are generally catered for in special classes. Therefore, special schools now accommodate the most complex cases. They must not be expected to manage Pupil Teacher Ratios that are equal to those that exist in special classes in mainstream schools.

In the severe/profound category of pupils with ASD, the optimum number of pupils per class has been proven from experience to be 4 pupils. These pupils need a calm, quiet environment where staff can implement techniques to manage behaviours. At present the ratio of 6 pupils to one teacher including up to 3 SNAs in the room does not allow for this type of environment. As a result, anxiety levels increase to the point where pupils become so upset/challenging that they cannot access the extent of the educational programmes on offer.

IPPN is calling for a revision of the staffing schedule for special schools and that additional factors specific to special schools are taken in to consideration to maximize class averages/sizes.

IPPN recommends the following:

- All Special School principals should be administrative i.e. released from full-time teaching duties.
- All Special School Deputy Principals should be administrative when the school reaches 6 classroom teachers. All other Deputies should have a number of 'administration days' available to them on a pro-rata basis.
- A review of Special Schools resourcing must be fast-tracked i.e. a new 'SERC report' is required. This review must acknowledge that pupils with severe challenging behaviours and those with high medical needs need to be accommodated in much smaller class groupings and be allocated appropriate teaching and SNA support.
- The number and complexity of health and safety risks, including the risks around child protection, require that additional resources be made available to special schools. This could be delivered through additional middle leadership with specific responsibility for health and safety or a greatly improved PTR which would enable more teachers to take on responsibility for Health & Safety across the school. IPPN recommends a move to 4:1, down from 6:1 as in SERC report.
- The management of escort supports in each special school requires dedicated resources, including out-of-hours work. Some of this work could be centralised across special schools in a catchment area e.g. shared training, however most of the work is specific to each school and the needs of individual pupils and their families.
- In order to manage their schools, Principals need to have adequate qualified administrative staff such as a school administrator and teachers to whom they can delegate effectively and fairly.

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## 4. INCREASE THE CAPITATION GRANT

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Primary schools have been significantly challenged by the cuts to all grants over the past several years, particularly the capitation grant. This has forced schools to fundraise to pay for basic running costs, to curtail support to disadvantaged pupils and to cease maintaining vital infrastructure, such as IT facilities. This short-term focus on cost-cutting has consequences. It results in problems building up across school infrastructure, which ultimately cost far more to resolve in the long run than paying for routine maintenance on an ongoing basis. It also takes up considerable management time and energy that should be spent elsewhere.

The primary level Capitation Grant should be on a par with second level. The main expenses in the school have no bearing on the age of the pupils such as lighting, heat, insurance, maintenance, security, cleaning, etc. Restoring the capitation grant to pre-2008 levels would enable schools to start replacing or repairing school facilities and refocus their energies on teaching and learning.

A recent IPPN survey (January 2017) highlighted that 48% of schools are running at a financial deficit at this present moment. Almost 65% of schools request a 'voluntary contribution' and 28% of these schools spend that money on servicing utility bills. Voluntary contributions also service the purchase of art and craft requisites, curriculum materials and extra-curricular activities.

It is critical that schools are adequately resourced, to allow teachers and principals to refocus their energies on teaching and learning and to cease requesting financial contributions from parents to pay for basic requisites, and to start replacing outdated and broken resources.

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## 5. DIGNIFIED STEP-DOWN FACILITY FOR PRINCIPALS

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The lack of a clearly-defined contract for Principals and an unclear role definition has been a cause of serious concern for IPPN since its establishment. The lack of an entrance strategy and, more particularly, an exit mechanism from the role requires urgent attention.

Currently, the only option for principals who, for whatever reason, feel that they can no longer continue in a leadership role, but who wish to remain in the teaching profession, is to resign as principal and assume the most junior position in the school if there is a position available. In many cases this involves them having to apply for substitute work, maternity leave posts and fixed term posts. Due to the scarcity of permanent posts and the operation of the redeployment panel, principals who step down often have very little chance of securing a permanent position. In contrast, a deputy principal relinquishing his / her promoted post loses the allowance for the position but maintains seniority in terms of their length of service. This anomaly needs to be urgently addressed as a matter of fairness among school leaders.

Principals have requested a scheme to allow them the option to step down with dignity and to continue in their chosen profession without the pressures and responsibilities of school leadership. IPPN recommends that this scheme should have the following features:

- Fixed term contracts for a defined period (possibly 7 years) should be introduced with a clause for review at the end of that period and with the possibility for a principal to step down and to continue in the teaching profession without loss of seniority.
- If there is no vacancy in his/her current school at the time of stepping down, the principal should be placed on the redeployment panel.
- IPPN further suggests that it would be appropriate for the DES to recognize a former principal's years of service as a school leader in calculating that principal's pension entitlement to be commensurate with the number of years' service as a school leader.

The introduction of a dignified step-down facility would ensure that those in leadership positions are treated appropriately. An added advantage will be the increased number of opportunities for aspiring school leaders stepping up to these vacated leadership roles with energy and enthusiasm.



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## 6. REDUCE THE THRESHOLD FOR ADMINISTRATIVE PRINCIPALSHIP

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Teaching Principals lead the learning of up to 177 pupils, and lead and manage up to 7 mainstream class teachers, often with an additional complement of Special Needs Assistants, Resource Teachers, Bus Escorts, a part-time secretary, a part-time caretaker and other resources on an ongoing basis. They are expected to lead the school, leadership and learning in the school and its staff while teaching full-time.

IPPN is calling for the threshold for administrative principalship, where the principal does not have a full-time teaching responsibility, to be reduced considerably to reflect the workload of a school principal. IPPN proposes to reduce the threshold to 144 pupils and/or to include all adults managed by the principal in the calculation, rather than including only class teachers.

Special schools led by Teaching Principals face particular challenges over and above those of other Teaching Principals. Typically, there are significantly higher numbers of special needs assistants and bus escorts in special schools. In addition, there are multi-disciplinary teams and medical teams that must be coordinated, not to mention the coordination of certified programmes at junior and senior cycle level. IPPN believes that all special schools should be led by an Administrative Principal.

IPPN makes the following recommendations:

- The threshold for the appointment of an Administrative Principal to be reduced from 178 to 144 pupils.
- The appointment schedule for an Administrative Principal should not be based just on pupil enrolment numbers but on the overall staffing level in each school, to include teaching as well as non-teaching staff – SNA's, administrative and caretaking staff, bus escorts, therapists, etc – as the management of these roles add significantly to the principal's workload.
- Administrative days for schools below 144 pupils should be calculated proportionally but set at a minimum of one day per week.
- The thresholds for the appointment of administrative principals in DEIS schools and in schools with Special Autism Units be maintained or reduced proportionally.
- All special schools should have an administrative principal with immediate effect.

The projected cost of reducing the threshold to 144 pupils would be approximately €10.5M per annum which is a relatively small outlay to allow teaching principals to carry out their role more effectively.

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## 7. EMOTIONAL WELLBEING IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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Reports of depression, obesity and mental health issues have doubled in very young children attending our primary schools. Instances of neglect and challenging welfare situations have increased significantly as reported by principals in 2016. Homelessness is now one of the greatest challenges faced by an increasing number of families. Homelessness directly impacts on the emotional wellbeing of children and adults involved and consequently impacts on childrens experience of school.

In 2016 a taskforce for Youth Mental Health was established by the present government with Helen Mc Entee entrusted as lead. The aim was to have 'Physical actions that can be implemented within communities' as an outcome of the discussions. The commitment of the Minister for Education & Skills to 'Promote wellbeing in our school communities to support success in school and life' as outline in the DES Action Plan for Education 2016/2019 is commendable. However, given the prevalence of such issues in our primary schools, it is crucial that principals and teachers are supported as a matter of urgency to identify problems and attend to them adequately. Children can present with a very wide range of issues on a spectrum of emotional wellbeing, from complete wellness on one end to suicidal at the other. While the supports available at the more extreme end are relatively well known, it is less clear where to go for help when a child displays distress or when there is dysfunction or stress in the home.

Teachers recognise that it is not their responsibility to 'solve' children's mental health issues; only medical professionals have the relevant expertise and qualifications to do so. However, teachers as proactive care givers do have a significant role to play in supporting distressed children. We can give children the language and the opportunity to express their emotions. We can create a school environment where it is safe for a child to talk to a teacher. Schools can actively plan and assess their work in this area through SSE. The establishment of the WTL (Wellbeing for Teachers & Learners) group following the success of the IPPN/NAPD Wellbeing Symposium held in November 2015 is a very positive action where the promotion of a culture of wellbeing in our school communities is central. The planned WTL Wellbeing Event in November 2017 aims to further highlight the critical importance of embracing a culture of wellbeing in our schools through positive and sustainable actions that are not only doable but very easily embedded.

IPPN is making the following recommendations for allocations to be made in Budget 2018:

- Deliver on the DES Action Plan for Education In the area of Emotional Wellbeing and involve all key education stakeholders in the process.
- Map existing guidelines for emotional wellbeing and identify gaps in provision.
- Develop a cross-sectoral continuum of supports and services for schools, to clarify which service to engage, for what type of issue, and how to go about it.
- Review the national curriculum, ensuring that adequate time is given to personal development, emotional wellbeing and resilience for all pupils. Rebalance in favour of SPHE and PE.
- Staff wellbeing is central to managing the emotional wellbeing of children. Personal wellbeing should be an integral component of a teacher's CPD, beginning with pre-service education.
- SSE and external evaluations to include a focus on school culture and emotional wellbeing for all.

- Promote engagement with the WTL Group in a collaborative and proactive way to ensure real progress towards culture change in our schools.

IPPN believes that implementing these recommendations would greatly improve schools' ability to support children to develop emotionally and manage issues that arise during their school years. The timing is right, given the recent emphasis on mental health and wellbeing across government departments and Irish society generally.

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## **8. IMPROVE THE PUPIL/TEACHER RATIO**

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Given the diversity of needs present in classrooms today teachers are increasingly challenged to ensure that every child in their care has equal and appropriate access to a differentiated curriculum. We remain amongst the highest in Europe in terms of class size. Where the class size is manageable, children have more equitable access to education and teachers can lead learning in their classrooms more effectively.

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## **9. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL LEARNING IN SCHOOLS**

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In the foreword to the Digital Strategy 2015-2020, former Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O Sullivan stated 'I want to encourage all teachers to use ICT in the classroom to bring learning to life for students; to give learners the tools to collaborate and to examine engaging problems; to research and analyse information; and to use ICT resources to communicate their ideas and to share what they create with others beyond the walls of their classroom or school'.

In order for this to become a reality, IPPN believes that all schools must have access to high speed broadband and technical support. Objective 1.5 of Goal 1 within the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 is to increase the use of ICT in teaching, learning and assessment so that learners are equipped with the necessary skills to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing learning environment. The Governments National Broadband Plan commits to a State funded initiative to deliver high speed broadband to parts of Ireland where commercial high speed broadband services are currently not available. The Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 commits to investing in the infrastructure necessary – WiFi, broadband, equipment, learning resources by Q1 of 2018. The intervention is designed to conclusively address connectivity issues in Ireland.

The Digital Strategy recognises that schools require a robust, reliable infrastructure in order to effectively integrate ICT into all aspects of school life. IPPN highlights that for this to occur the need for a uniform, reliant, high speed access to broadband in all primary schools nationwide is necessary. IPPN is seeking that the role out of high speed broadband to all primary schools is prioritised, irrespective of geographic location, to ensure that the use of Digital Technology is integrated in the learning for every child.

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## **CONCLUSION**

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IPPN urges the Department of Finance and the Department of Education and Skills to prioritise primary education in this year's education budget and to carefully consider each recommendation made within this document. These recommendations are from 1,322 principals that have carefully considered the challenge of prioritising expenditure within primary education. These priorities, if fully funded, would radically alter the capacity of primary schools and school leaders to fulfil their responsibilities, which will ultimately lead to the improvement in education outcomes for all children.