

IPPN Pre-Budget Submission 2017



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Introduction

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 association 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 recently launched 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, having engaged with its members and received 1,332 responses directly from principals, identifying the top Principals' Priorities. These are compiled as the following 10 priorities in submission for the primary education Budget 2017.

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. Dignified step-down facility for principals.
5. Reduce the threshold for Administrative Principalship.
6. Restore full resource hours.
7. Emotional Wellbeing in the school community.
8. Increase the Capitation Grant.
9. Improve the pupil/teacher ratio.
10. Information Technology and Digital Learning in Schools.

1. Minimum of One Administration Day per Week for Teaching Principals

There are approximately 60% of primary principals currently teaching full-time in addition to their leadership role as close to 2,000 schools in the state have fewer than 177 pupils. Principals in these schools have full-time teaching duties with the exception of a 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 (45% have no personal office space or dedicated storage) and the least ancillary staff support despite the fact that they are teaching full time and desperately need full-time secretarial support.

Teaching Principals across the border in Northern Ireland have a substitute teacher available at least one day per week (used flexibly to meet the needs of the school). Principals in the Republic need a similar level of substitute cover/release time to address the anomalies in their working conditions compared with non-teaching principals. The level of release time for teaching principals needs to be increased to ensure that all principals have adequate support to carry out their role as leaders of learning. The current situation is educationally inequitable and professionally unsustainable.

2. Restore Middle Leadership Posts

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.

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.

3. Revise the Staffing Schedule for Special Schools

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

It would appear that there is no account taken of the complexity of need of individuals attending special schools in determining pupil/teacher ratios, including maximum class averages/sizes. Every class in a special school is a multi-disability class. 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.

4. Dignified Step-Down Facility for Principals

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 and start back at the level of a newly-qualified teacher. In many cases this involves them having to apply for sub 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.

Principals have requested a scheme to allow principal teachers 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 stipulations:

- 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 and pension.
- 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.

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.

5. Reduce the Threshold for Administrative Principalship

Principals with 178 pupils are managing a staff of approximately 7 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. While a principal with one more pupil (and one more teacher) has none of the teaching responsibilities.

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. This will also allow for the increased complexity of special schools.

IPPN makes the following recommendations:

- The threshold for the appointment of an Administrative Principal to be reduced from 178 to 144 pupils.
- The staffing schedule to be based not on pupil enrolment numbers but on the overall staffing level in each school, to include teaching as well as non-teaching staff – 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 have an administrative principal with immediate effect.

6. Restore Full Resource Hours

The 15% cut in resource hours has disproportionately affected some of the most vulnerable children in primary schools – those with special educational needs – as well as their classmates. Under the proposed new model, the Department of Education and Skills are reinstating these resource hours that had been cut. Irrespective of what model is put in place, full resource hours need to be reinstated.

7. Emotional Wellbeing in the School Community

Since 2009, depression and obesity among children has doubled and neglect has increased by 6%. In 2016, principals report that the greatest child welfare challenge is family issues such as marital breakdown and bereavement.

Given the prevalence of such issues in our primary schools, it is crucial that principals and teachers are equipped to identify problems and address them adequately. Yet 80% of principals feel 'insufficiently trained' or 'not trained at all' to identify mental health issues in children, much less adequately support them once they have been identified. 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 at home.

It is not teachers' responsibility to deal with children's mental health issues; only medical professionals have the relevant expertise and qualifications to do so. However, teachers *do* have a role to play. 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.

IPPN is making the following recommendations for allocations to be made in Budget 2017:

- Create an Action Plan for Emotional Wellbeing in Schools, from pre-school to post-primary, involving *all* key education stakeholders.
- 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.
- Develop a CPD programme on emotional wellbeing for teachers and for principals.
- Review the national curriculum, ensuring that adequate time is given to personal development, emotional wellbeing and resilience. Rebalance in favour of SPHE and PE.
- Staff wellbeing is central to managing the emotional wellbeing of children. Personal development 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.

8. Increase the Capitation Grant

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. The primary level Capitation Grant should be on a par with second level students. 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.

9. Improve the Pupil/Teacher Ratio

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. Where the class size is manageable, children have more equitable access to education and teachers can lead learning in their classrooms more effectively.

10. Information Technology and Digital Learning in Schools

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. This is currently not the case. 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 intervention is designed to conclusively address connectivity issues in Ireland. There are over 1500 schools in the target area for the intervention, most of which are primary schools. There is no defined time frame during which this will occur.

Furthermore, 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 roll 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.

Conclusion

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 deliver their responsibilities, which will ultimately lead to the improvement in education outcomes for all children.