

Prepared for:

- the Minister for Education
- the Minister for Finance
- the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform
- the Secretary General of the Department of Education

by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN)

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INTRODUCTION

The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) is the professional body for over 6,000 Principals and Deputy Principals who lead 3,200+ primary schools, and is recognised by the Minister for Education as an official Education Partner. IPPN works with the Department of Education (DE), management bodies, unions, education agencies and other key stakeholders to advance primary education.

The **focus** of our budget submission this year is on sustainable leadership and **those elements of funding that will have the greatest impact on primary schools and school leaders' capacity to fully discharge their leadership and management accountabilities.**

We present **three key priorities** for Budget 2024, and expand on these in the sections below:

1. Increasing leadership capacity and developing a culture of shared leadership
2. SEN Allocations and Resourcing
3. Review of Primary School Governance Structure.

We also support the calls by our fellow education partners for

1. Enhanced funding for capitation and ancillary services, in line with funding provided to post-primary schools
2. Funding for ICT, STEM, cleaning etc. to be placed on a permanent multi-annual footing

We look forward to an opportunity to discuss this submission in further detail with you.

INCREASING LEADERSHIP CAPACITY & DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF SHARED LEADERSHIP

In 2019, IPPN embarked on a three-year research project on sustainable leadership, which sought to

- examine the sustainability of school leadership roles in the context of leadership and school effectiveness
- identify the main contributing factors that compromise the sustainability of that leadership
- set out proposals and opportunities that will contribute to effective and sustainable school leadership in the future.

The resulting report – ***Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action - A Roadmap to Sustainability*** (IPPN 2022)

- details the sheer breadth of tasks and responsibilities falling to school leaders and the disproportionate focus on managing the organisation that systematically diverts them from their core purpose of leading teaching and learning
- identifies that school leaders rate the sustainability of their roles at 3.96 out of 10 (teaching principals rate it at 3.53 out of 10) and that 97% of school leaders agree that the key issue that undermines the sustainability of their leadership role is the number of tasks and responsibilities that divert their attention away from their core purpose as a school leader
- reveals that the incidence of burnout, stress and depressive symptoms among Irish primary school leaders is almost double that of the healthy working population and more than double for sleeping troubles and cognitive stress

The report irrefutably demonstrates that the current reality in which school leadership is practised and experienced limits leadership and school effectiveness, undermines the sustainability of the role and impacts negatively on the health and wellbeing of school leaders. This has a direct impact on school effectiveness and, ultimately, on outcomes for children.

The report identifies that having sufficient time and space to lead and the capacity to share leadership effectively are crucial factors in enhancing leadership capacity. This is corroborated by independent research in the Irish context that points to the critical need for further investment in the sharing of leadership and the development of leadership capacity in primary schools (CSL, 2022; OECD, 2008).

At post-primary level, emerging research points to the impact of the investment in additional deputy principal posts and time for deputy principals and principals to collaborate as a major factor in increasing leadership capacity and supporting the sustainability of leadership roles (Kavanagh, 2020; CSL, 2022).

The extent to which leadership capacity has been undermined in our primary schools will compromise the effective implementation of initiatives and reform within the system – specifically the rollout of the primary revised curriculum and the actions identified within the Department of Education’s statement of priorities.

With regard to Budget 2024, there are a number of key supports that need to be funded to make primary school leadership more effective and sustainable in the short-term; these are set out below.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT DAYS FOR DEPUTY PRINCIPALS

The sharing of leadership and management responsibilities with the deputy principal and assistant principals is central to the effective functioning of any school. It provides a very necessary support for principals in carrying out their role. This is fully acknowledged in DES circulars [63/2017 – Leadership and Management in Primary Schools](#) and [70/2018 – Leadership & Management in Primary Schools](#).

All school leaders want and need dedicated time to focus on leading the teaching and learning in their schools as this is in keeping with their core purpose as instructional leaders.

As a Covid measure, “release” days were sanctioned for deputy principals in schools where there was an administrative principal. Research by IPPN and CSL confirms that this dedicated time was transformational in these schools, allowing school leaders (the principal and the deputy principal) to collaborate on the various leadership and management responsibilities and to more effectively plan and share the leadership. It also reduced stress levels and eased the perception of the leadership role being ‘undoable’. However, it must also be noted that schools with teaching principals, who are most squeezed in terms of time and space for leadership and management, would have derived a significant benefit from release days for their deputy principals.

Recommendation

IPPN urges the Department of Finance and the Department of Education to acknowledge the importance of sufficient dedicated time for deputy principals in **all** schools to focus on leadership and management by placing the leadership and management days allocated during COVID on a permanent and statutory footing from Budget 2024.

THE CRITERIA FOR ADMINISTRATIVE PRINCIPALSHIP AND DEPUTY PRINCIPALSHIP

The status of a principal's and deputy principal's role (teaching or administrative) is currently determined by the number of pupils enrolled in their schools. This is not an appropriate metric to use to determine such status. Taking account of the number of staff (mainstream class teachers, Special Education teachers, SNAs, ancillary staff, bus escorts, etc.) that they lead and manage would be a far more appropriate way of determining the status of principals. It is anomalous that a principal with 177 pupils has one day a week to focus on leadership and management, and another with 178 pupils can do so full-time. A graduated approach to the provision of leadership and management time for leaders of smaller schools would be fairer and more equitable than the current all-out (administrative) or 'almost-all-in' (teaching) approach.

Recommendations

1. Determine the status of school leadership (for both principals and deputy principals) by taking account of the total number of staff (mainstream class teachers, Special Education teachers, SNAs, ancillary staff, bus escorts, etc.) that they lead and manage.
2. Ensure a graduated approach to the provision of leadership and management time for leaders of schools who do not meet the threshold for administrative status, to replace the current all-out (administrative) or 'almost-all-in' (teaching) approach.

SEN ALLOCATIONS & RESOURCING

The provision of adequate supports relating to special educational need is an area of significant concern to school leaders. Those who retired early from their school leadership role cited ‘adequate supports for pupils with SEN’ as the top-ranked support out of seven that would have helped them to stay in the role (IPPN, 2022).

For Budget 2024, IPPN has prioritised SEN resourcing and allocations, and specifically the following aspects:

1. The differing challenges of resourcing high & low incidence needs
2. Identifying & meeting the level of low incidence, complex need in schools

THE DIFFERING CHALLENGES OF RESOURCING HIGH & LOW INCIDENCE NEEDS

The model of providing schools with a quantum of resources (teaching hours/posts) has particular merit in the context of planning for, supporting and resourcing schools to meet high incidence special needs as the data upon which it is based is readily accessible, relatively predictable and not subject to significant volatility. Accordingly, schools are more likely to receive a quantum of resources that will be reflective of high incidence need and that will enable them to adequately support those children who present with such needs. However, the significant complicating factor that undermines the effectiveness of the current approach is that there is no differentiation between how the calculation of the quantum of resources is determined for children presenting with low incidence, complex special needs. The data relating to such children is not readily accessible or predictable and is subject to significant volatility not just from year to year but even within the course of any given school year.

IDENTIFYING AND MEETING THE LEVEL OF LOW INCIDENCE COMPLEX NEED

IPPN accepts that the task of accurately determining the level of low incidence, complex special need in schools is challenging. However, it is clear that school leaders have significant misgivings about the accuracy of their schools’ complex needs’ profiles, the information vacuum that exists as to how those profiles are determined, and the system’s inability to respond quickly to increased need.

Children with low incidence complex needs generally fall into three categories:

- those whose needs have been clearly identified and whose transition to school is anticipated, planned for and resourced
- those whose needs may have been identified but have not been flagged to the school and accordingly have not been planned for and resourced
- those whose needs emerge over a period of time and could not have been planned for and resourced.

Currently, the complex needs' element of a school's profile takes account of the number of pupils who are

- currently enrolled in the school with identified low incidence complex needs
- due to leave the school at the end of the school year
- entering junior infants with Complex Needs (as identified by the HSE) – Circular 0020/2022.

Unidentified/Undisclosed Need

The adequacy of a school's quantum of resources is compromised largely, but not exclusively, as a result of children presenting in the school, whose needs have not been flagged to the school or children with identified complex needs who are not linked in with a disability team.

Notwithstanding the excellent work of public health nurses, GPs, Children's Disability Network (CDN) teams and early childhood educators, it is not uncommon for children to present in school with clearly identifiable complex needs that have not been flagged in advance to the school. There are two possible reasons for this:

1. parents may not have identified their child as having complex needs and may not have engaged with services
2. parents were fearful that flagging their child as having complex needs would in some way have compromised the school place.

Either way, when such circumstances arise, it can have a profoundly negative impact on the experience and learning of the child and a consequential impact on the experience and learning of the other children in the class.

A further complicating factor is whether a child is linked in with or known to a CDN team. According to an article in the Irish Times on 03.03.23, over one third of CDNT posts were unfilled in 2022 equating to

707 posts across the 91 CDN teams. The consequential lack of capacity to deal with the caseload presenting means that it is inevitable that children are presenting in primary schools with complex needs that have not been identified or assessed.

Circular 0020/2022 stipulates that *'A value is applied for each student counted in the complex need category in your school. Data has been received from the HSE Children Disability Network teams on the number of new entrants with complex needs to primary schools and this data has been incorporated into the model.'* Given the lack of capacity in such teams, as previously identified, the premise upon which the model is based is undermined and the accuracy of the allocations is compromised. Children are not being identified for inclusion when calculating the schools' allocation of resources.

Emerging Need

The final category of children referred to above is those whose needs emerge over a period of time and could not have been planned for and resourced. Typically, these would be children with emotional behavioural disorders as a result of adverse childhood experiences, attachment issues or trauma, but can also include children with autistic spectrum disorders. Such emerging need can compromise the adequacy of a school's allocation of resources (teachers and Special Needs Assistants).

Circular 0020/2022 stipulates that *'The total special education allocations provided for schools anticipate that there will be some emerging needs over the course of the model. Schools are resourced to provide for such emerging needs, within the totality of the allocation.'* However, if that allocation is already inaccurate/inadequate due to the numbers of children presenting whose needs have not been identified, then the buffer that is built into the allocation, to meet emerging need, has already been compromised.

When the adequacy of a school's allocation of resources is compromised either by unidentified or emerging need, it is imperative that the system is agile enough to respond quickly so as not to unnecessarily or unduly compromise the school's ability to adequately meet and respond to that need. This is not currently the case.

The efficient and timely manner in which schools have been allocated EAL resources to meet the needs of children enrolled in our schools from Ukraine has been revelatory and most welcome. It clearly demonstrates that an agile response is achievable. It has clearly highlighted how schools can be adequately resourced even in circumstances where the numbers of children presenting with a particular need are volatile.

The crucial importance of the role of the SENO

The vast majority of children with low incidence complex needs can thrive in a mainstream class setting or in a special class in a mainstream school if:

- their needs have been identified to the school in a timely manner
- there is sufficient time to plan for and put in place the supports that the children require
- the school's allocation of supports (teaching, special needs assistance, technology, furniture, building modifications, etc.) is adequate.

To ensure that this is the case, every school needs access to a dedicated SENO who has a manageable caseload of schools that will ensure their intimate familiarity with the evolving complex needs' profiles of those schools. This is currently not the case. On average, each SENO has between 60 and 70 schools on their caseload. Furthermore, schools in specific areas do not have a SENO and have access only to a "reporting" or "facilitating" SENO. This compromises the depth of knowledge and understanding of those schools' profile of needs as well as all of the processes that are managed by or supported by SENOs. This leaves children in these schools at a very unfair disadvantage over other children in other schools who are supported directly by a SENO.

Special Schools

Special schools have a considerable number of additional challenges, including resourcing and allocations, over and above those facing mainstream schools. Account needs to be taken of the additional resourcing required.

Recommendations

IPPN understands and accepts that identifying and meeting special educational need is complex and requires significant investment of resources and systemic planning. Such planning needs to include those who are delivering inclusion in our schools on a daily basis.

1. The low incidence complex needs profile of a school needs to be considered as a separate entity to high incidence needs. Each school should receive a quantum of resources specifically to meet that low incidence complex need based on a complete and up-to-date dataset.
2. Provide funding to ensure that every school has a dedicated SENO to ensure the dataset that informs allocations is up to date.

3. Mechanisms must also be in place to allow for a necessary and timely adjustment to the school's allocation in circumstances where previously unidentified or emerging needs are established, which have a demonstrable impact on a school's low incidence complex needs' profile.
4. Allow for additional resourcing for special schools and special classes to address clearly identified health & safety issues

REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

The current 'Board of Management' model of school governance in Irish primary schools was introduced in 1975 to replace the 'Single Manager' system that had been in place until that juncture. The context in which educational governance was exercised, at that time, was fundamentally different in terms of legislation, policy and compliance to that experienced by schools and Boards of Management today.

Boards are operating in a complex regulatory environment where the levels of oversight and compliance demanded of them are significant. When one further considers that these Board members are volunteers with no specific, relevant expertise guaranteed and limited opportunities, if any, for induction and training, the inadequate and haphazard nature of the school governance structure becomes apparent.

IPPN's report *Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action - A Roadmap to Sustainability* outlines a number of key issues relating to the governance of schools, and in particular the impact of these issues on the sustainability of the school leadership role.

- 74% of school leaders report that the current governance structure significantly affects their workload
- 90% of school leaders advise that there is a scarcity of willing volunteers to serve as members of Boards of Management
- 91% of school leaders agree that a new governance structure is required to support a far more complex school system with educational, legislative, financial, human and other resource responsibilities

It is in this context that IPPN urges that the current Board of Management structure be reviewed to ensure that it is the structure best suited to meet the governance, compliance and oversight needs of our primary schools.

Furthermore, in the context of the formation of new Boards of Management in the autumn of 2023, IPPN urges that all members of Boards of Management be obliged to complete an induction module,

prior to attending the first meeting of the new Board, to better ensure an understanding of roles and responsibilities.

Finally, IPPN urges that the Revised Governance Manual 2023-2027 be sufficiently flexible to facilitate the piloting of modified approaches to governance, strictly within the confines of the Small School Action Research project. Considerable learnings would be gleaned from such a piloted approach that could inform future approaches to governance.

Recommendations

1. Initiate a process of review of the current Board of Management governance structure to ascertain if it is the structure best suited to meet the governance, compliance and oversight needs of our primary schools. Such a review should consider the capacity of Boards to take account of and respond to all school-related legislation, regulatory requirements and DE Circulars which directly influence and impact on the operation of schools.
2. Require all members of Boards of Management to complete an induction module on their role and responsibilities, prior to attending the first meeting of the new Board.
3. Allow for the piloting of modified approaches to governance, within the confines of the Small School Action Research project. In this regard, IPPN recommends that particular consideration be given to affording each cluster within the Small Schools Action research project the facility to co-opt an Administrative Officer who will report to each of the individual Boards of Management within the cluster.