

# Primary School Leadership – A Roadmap to Sustainability

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The article details the Sustainable Leadership project of the Irish Primary Principals' Network and synthesises the findings of our research and the conclusions we have drawn. It outlines the recommendations for action that we have made, which, if implemented, will better ensure school leadership that is both effective and sustainable.

*'Leadership and learning are indispensable to each another' –  
from the speech that John F. Kennedy was to deliver in Dallas in  
November 1963*

## Introduction

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.

Since its foundation over 20 years ago, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), as the professional body for primary school leaders, has provided supports and services that enable that empowerment. Those supports and services are shaped directly by our engagement with our members to ensure that they are in keeping with their needs. That direct engagement has 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 frustration and disillusionment has increased noticeably in recent years and prompted IPPN to undertake this Sustainable Leadership project.

## Sustainable Leadership report

The report of the project analyses the context and current reality in which school leadership is practised and experienced in Irish primary schools. Our analysis was informed by select academic literature and practitioner research. We mapped and charted the expansion of the role by detailing the tasks and responsibilities ascribed to school leaders in Department circulars, policy guidelines, and relevant education legislation. We cross-referenced those tasks and

responsibilities in the quality framework for leadership and management, as detailed in the *Looking at Our Schools* (2016) policy document. This exercise was completed before publication of the updated *Looking at Our Schools* (2022), but the domains and standards remain substantially the same. We identified which of the four domains of that framework each of the tasks and responsibilities falls into.

Our analysis was further informed by data gleaned from the 1,000+ responses to our member survey and from the Irish Principal & Deputy Principal Health and Wellbeing survey (2022), commissioned in partnership with our sister organisation at post-primary level, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). The data is compelling:

- The 1,000+ school leaders who responded to our survey gave an average rating of 3.96 out of 10 for the sustainability of their leadership role.
- The sustainability rating fell to 3.53 out of 10 for teaching principalship.
- 97% strongly agreed (78%) or agreed (19%) that the key issue undermining the sustainability of their leadership role is the number of tasks and responsibilities they must undertake that divert their attention away from their core purpose as a school leader.

### Areas of responsibility

**“ Respondents identified curriculum planning and implementation and quality assurance of teaching and learning as two of the areas of responsibility that were most closely aligned with their core purpose, but also as the top two areas for which they had insufficient time.**

These responses are better understood in the context of our analysis of Department of Education circulars issued since the beginning of 2016, as well as policy guidelines and relevant education legislation with reference to the quality framework for leadership and management:

- 100% of the 162 analysed documents detailed tasks and responsibilities for school leaders that fell within the domain of Managing the Organisation.
- Fewer than 25% of those documents detailed tasks and responsibilities for school leaders that fell within the domain of Leading Teaching and Learning.
- Tasks and responsibilities relating to Leading School Development and Developing Leadership Capacity were identified in only 18% and 14%, respectively, of the documents analysed.

This resonates with our member survey, where respondents identified *curriculum planning and implementation* and *quality assurance of teaching and learning* as two of the areas of responsibility that were most closely aligned with their core purpose, but also as the top two areas for which they had insufficient time.

The areas of responsibility they identified as least closely aligned with their core purpose – maintenance of buildings and grounds, financial management, and administrative tasks – were also the top three areas where they felt they spent too much of their time.

The Irish Principal & Deputy Principal Health and Wellbeing survey (2022) corroborates these findings. It identifies that the top two stressors for primary school leaders are the *sheer quantity of work* and the *lack of time to focus on teaching and learning*.

The data from this survey details the impact that the practice and experience of school leadership is having on the health and wellbeing of our primary school leaders. It 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 researchers conclude:

*This report presents compelling evidence that many Irish primary school leaders are struggling with complex job roles and competing job demands. Policymakers and systems administrators should engage with school leaders to identify the workload challenges that they face and provide support to enable leaders to spend time on the activities that matter most.*

Our analysis has led us to conclude 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.

## Recommendations for effective leadership

Subsequent chapters in the report explore what could better ensure school leadership of the highest quality in our schools and a leadership role that is sustainable. To that we end, we considered:

- what constitutes effective school leadership and the core purpose that underpins it
- how best to develop leadership capacity and prepare aspiring leaders for the role
- how to better ensure that recruitment identifies the most suitable candidates
- whether all school leaders have sufficient time and space to exercise both the leadership and management dimensions of their role
- how leadership can be shared and supported more effectively in schools
- how the current governance structure in primary schools is impacting on the sustainability of school leadership roles and how that structure could be reimaged.

We have considered the key issues in each of these areas and have made specific and detailed recommendations that, where relevant, identify what school leaders can do for themselves, what IPPN can do, and what the system can do to better ensure leadership effectiveness and the sustainability of school leadership roles. A broad summary of those recommendations now follows:

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1. The roles of the principal and deputy principal should be clearly defined and delineated to better maintain the focus of school leadership on their core purpose of leading teaching and learning.
  2. Defining these roles should be based on shared understanding of what constitutes effective school leadership in the Irish context and take account of the domains and standards detailed in the Quality Framework for Leadership and Management in *Looking at Our Schools* (2022).
  3. Tasks and responsibilities not aligned with that core purpose should be redistributed, with a consequential reduction of workload.
  4. To assist this there should be increased capacity for shared leadership, increased and improved administrative support, and a governance structure that is developed and formally supported and thus fully capable of discharging its compliance and oversight functions.
  5. Preparation for leadership should be shaped and informed by this clearer understanding of the core purpose of school leadership and should not be generic.
  6. There should be three stages in that preparation and induction:
    7. pre-appointment (aspiring leaders)
    8. post-appointment but before taking up the role (newly appointed principals)
    9. after taking up the role (newly practising principals)
  10. Relevant and specific opportunities and supports for the development of leadership capacity should be made available at each of the three stages, both formally and informally.
  11. A consistent, national recruitment and appointment process should be developed, underpinned by the principles of HR best practice and supported by mandatory training for those engaged in recruitment.
  12. Additional and sufficient release time for teaching principals and deputy principals should be sanctioned, to better ensure their capacity to discharge their leadership and management duties and facilitate a collaborative, co-leadership approach.
  13. Administrative status as a principal or deputy principal should be provided based on the number of staff being led and managed, not the number of children enrolled in the school.
  14. All schools should have access to an adequate level of administrative support provided by staff who are appropriately skilled and remunerated.
  15. Greater account should be taken of the leadership demands of the different school contexts, and supports and resources should be tailored to help meet those demands – a generic or one-size-fits-all approach does not work.
  16. There should be a mandatory preparation and induction programme for newly appointed and newly practising deputy principals, with access for all deputy principals to rigorous and relevant mentoring and coaching.
  17. At post-primary level, the threshold for appointment of extra deputy principals has changed, reflecting the extra demands now on leadership at that level. Primary school leadership should be examined with a view to making similar provision.
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18. Professional development should be provided to leadership teams to foster and embed a culture of shared leadership in all schools. This should include, but not be limited to, access for all school leadership and management teams to professional development on how to optimise collaborative practice, and the provision of team coaching.
19. A review of the role and structure of boards of management should be undertaken, as a matter of urgency, before new boards are formed in 2023.
20. A clear distinction should be made between the governance function of the board of management and the leadership and management of the school.
21. Boards should be constituted and operate in accordance with governance best practice, including, but not limited to, mandatory training for all board members, specific roles for each board member, and rotation of membership to ensure some continuity.
22. Legal, financial, human resource, health and safety, and building/maintenance expertise should be available on a cluster or regional basis to all schools or through a meso-level structure. Strategic leverage of a digital infrastructure and regional hubs could achieve this.

## Conclusion

The education partners and stakeholders have a responsibility to ensure that current and future school leaders are given the opportunity to be as effective as they can be in their roles, as there is a consequential impact on school effectiveness and outcomes for children. IPPN looks forward to working with those partners and stakeholders to consider and implement the report's recommendations and to better ensure the future sustainability of school leadership roles. IPPN also understands that meaningful reform and change take time, but the urgency of the need for action is clear.

It is also important to note that the Irish Principal & Deputy Principal Health and Wellbeing survey found that 'Despite the challenges of the role, many school leaders find great meaning in their work and work in schools with high levels of trust, community and sense of justice.' When asked about the positives, most school leaders emphasise the privilege of leading the teaching and learning, and their enjoyment of teaching, whether full-time for teaching principals or now and then for administrative principals. It is widely understood that it is the 'other stuff' that distracts principals in particular, but also deputy principals, from engaging with their core purpose. This is what has fostered a perception of the role as unattractive.

There is work to be done to restore balance in the discourse on school leadership. It is hoped that implementing the recommendations in this report would have such an impact.