

The Health and Wellbeing of Irish School Leaders

What the research is telling us

Introduction

In 2022, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) – the professional associations representing Irish school leaders – commissioned independent research into the health and wellbeing of Irish school leaders. This was in response to concerns that the increasing complexity and workload demands of school leadership roles are impacting on the health and wellbeing of principals and deputy principals.

Professor Philip Riley and his research team in Deakin University, Melbourne, are undertaking the three-year longitudinal research study. Its aims are to:

- » support individual school leaders to prioritise their own health and wellbeing
- » enable IPPN and NAPD to benchmark the demands on school leaders in Ireland against comparative international statistics
- » help improve the leadership reality of Irish school leaders so their leadership roles are more sustainable
- » ensure the identification and delivery of supports for members in partnership with the Department of Education and other education stakeholders
- » have a significant impact on future policy development in Ireland.

Research findings

The tool used to conduct the research is the *Irish Principal and Deputy Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey*, a confidential survey for all school principals and deputy principals of primary and second-level schools in Ireland.



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This article details the findings of research commissioned by the Irish Primary Principals' Network and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals into the health and wellbeing of Irish school leaders in both primary and post-primary sectors. This research was undertaken in response to concerns that the increasing complexity and workload demands of school leadership roles are impacting on the health and wellbeing of principals and deputy principals.

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Its first section establishes a demographic profile, then it focuses on health and wellbeing.

School leaders have engaged with the survey in the 2022 and 2023 calendar years, with further engagement planned for spring 2024. Participants receive detailed, individualised reports on their own health and wellbeing, while the aggregated data forms the basis of sector-specific reports that detail the impacts of workload and work environments on school leaders' health and wellbeing.

In this article, and to highlight themes indicative of the broader findings, I will focus on three elements:

1. the negative health and wellbeing scores for primary and post-primary school leaders compared with the healthy working population
2. the sources-of-stress scores for primary and post-primary school leaders
3. comparisons with data from 2015, when this research was last undertaken with Irish school leaders.

Negative health and wellbeing outcomes

In terms of negative health and wellbeing outcomes, the data revealed that the incidences of burnout, stress, and depressive symptoms among Irish school leaders were almost double those of the healthy working population, and more than double for sleeping troubles and cognitive stress – see Table 1.

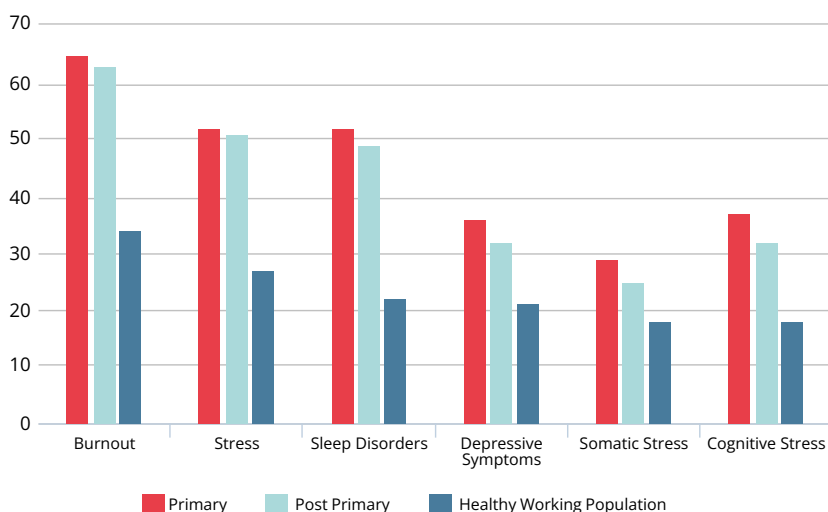


Table 1: Comparison of health and wellbeing outcomes of Irish school leaders and the healthy working population

Tables 2 and 3 detail the deterioration in the negative health and wellbeing outcomes since the research was last undertaken in 2015.

	2015	2022
Burnout	57.6	66.1
Stress	49.6	51.5
Sleeping troubles	45.4	51.3
Depressive symptoms	33.5	36.0
Somatic stress	23.8	28.7
Cognitive stress	34.2	37.5

Table 2: Comparison of health and wellbeing outcomes of primary school leaders between 2015 and 2022

	2015	2022
Burnout	56.5	63.6
Stress	47.9	50.3
Sleeping troubles	43.0	49.5
Depressive symptoms	29.0	32.5
Somatic stress	20.8	25.1
Cognitive stress	28.4	32.0

Table 3: Comparison of health and wellbeing outcomes of post-primary school leaders between 2015 and 2022

While all the elevated scores should be a cause for concern, most relevant to the sustainability of school leadership is the burnout score, which is statistically the most significant increase and also the most elevated score.

The negative health and wellbeing scores of primary and post-primary school leaders are similarly elevated, yet in all cases the scores for primary are higher. The most significant differentials are for depressive symptoms, somatic stress, and cognitive stress.

The consistent differential between the negative health and wellbeing scores of primary compared with post-primary school leaders highlights how leadership is experienced differently between the sectors. It may be attributable to better

infrastructural supports and increased capacity to share leadership at post-primary level.

Sources-of-stress scores

Tables 4 and 5 detail the sources-of-stress scores for primary and post-primary school leaders. It is significant, but perhaps unsurprising, that the top four sources of stress are identical across the sectors.

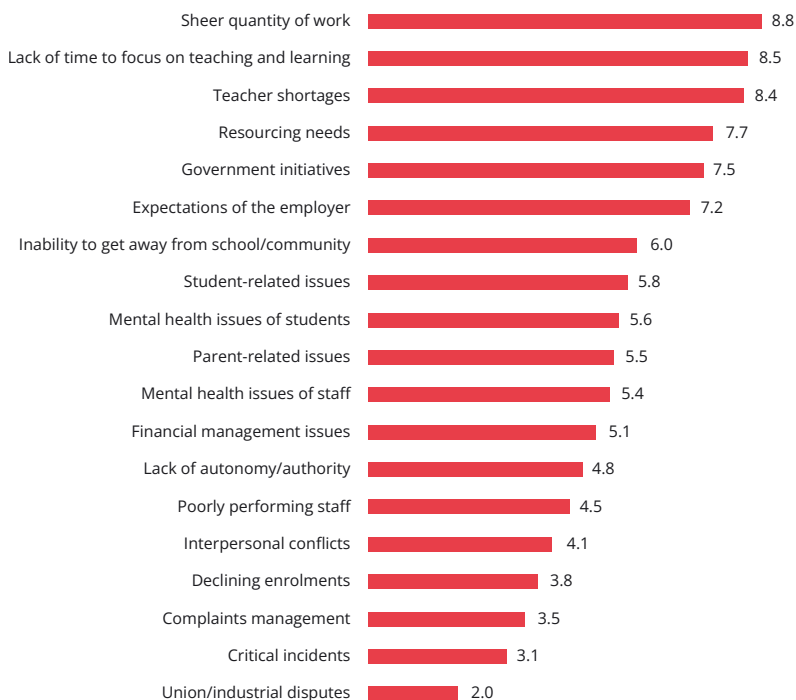


Table 4: Sources-of-stress scores (out of 10) for primary school leaders 2022

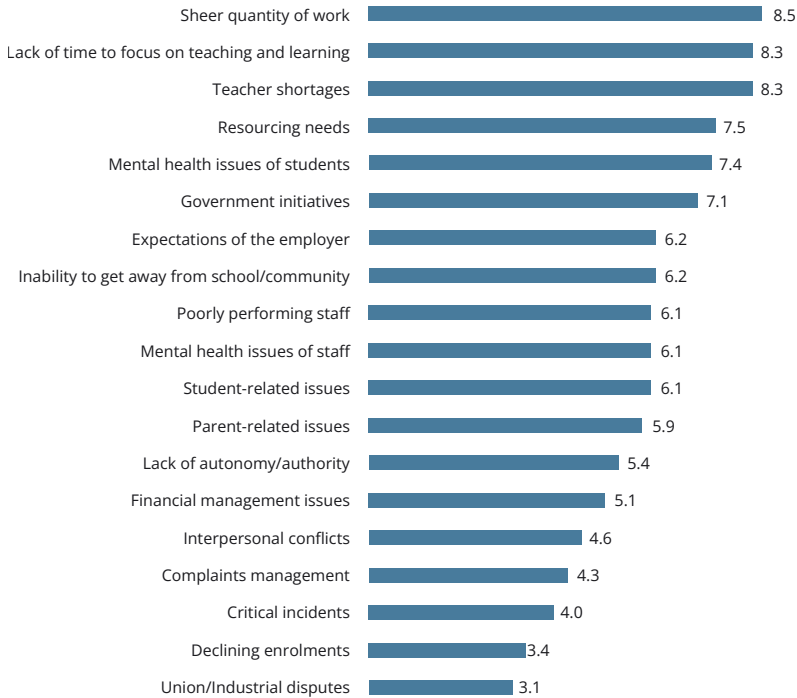


Table 5: Sources-of-stress scores (out of 10) for post-primary school leaders 2022

As shown in Table 6, the two highest sources of stress at work for primary school leaders were identical to the top two identified in 2015: quantity of work, and lack of time to focus on teaching and learning. In both cases, the stress rating has increased since 2015. The score for quantity of work has increased from a mean of 8.1 in 2015 to 8.8. The score for lack of time has increased from a mean of 7.9 to 8.5.

The third-highest source of stress is teacher shortages, which has jumped from 13th place in 2015. Its mean score for stress has more than doubled from 4.1 to 8.4. Mean stress scores have increased in 14 of the 19 categories.

	2015	2022
Sheer quantity of work	8.1	8.8
Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning	7.9	8.5
Teacher shortages	4.1	8.4
Resourcing needs	7.2	7.7
Government initiatives	6.9	7.5
Expectations of the employer	6.3	7.2

	2015	2022
Inability to get away from school/community	5.3	6.0
Student-related issues	5.7	5.8
Mental health issues of students	4.2	5.6
Parent-related issues	5.4	5.5
Mental health issues of staff	4.2	5.4
Financial management issues	5.2	5.1
Lack of autonomy/authority	3.9	4.8
Poorly performing staff	4.0	4.5
Interpersonal conflicts	4.2	4.1
Declining enrolments	3.3	3.8
Complaints management	3.8	3.5
Critical incidents	3.2	3.1
Industrial/union disputes	2.1	2.0

Table 6: Comparison of sources-of-stress scores for primary school leaders between 2015 and 2022

	2015	2022
Sheer quantity of work	8.0	8.5
Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning	7.9	8.3
Teacher shortages	5.1	8.3
Resourcing needs	5.7	7.5
Mental health issues of students	6.3	7.4
Government initiatives	7.1	7.1
Expectations of the employer	5.3	6.2
Inability to get away from school/community	5.5	6.2
Poorly performing staff	6.1	6.1
Mental health issues of staff	4.6	6.1
Student-related issues	6.4	6.1
Parent-related issues	5.6	5.9
Lack of autonomy/authority	4.5	5.4
Financial management issues	5.1	5.1

	2015	2022
Interpersonal conflicts	4.2	4.6
Complaints management	3.7	4.3
Critical incidents	3.3	4.0
Declining enrolments	3.3	3.4
Industrial/union disputes	2.0	3.1

Table 7: Comparison of sources-of-stress scores for post-primary school leaders between 2015 and 2022

As Table 7 shows, the sources-of-stress scores are broadly similar for post-primary and primary school leaders. The four highest-scoring sources are common to both sectors. Again, the two highest sources of work stress for post-primary school leaders were identical to the top two in 2015: quantity of work, and lack of time to focus on teaching and learning. But in both cases, the stress rating has increased since 2015. The score for quantity of work has increased from a mean of 8.0 in 2015 to 8.5. The score for lack of time has increased from a mean of 7.9 to 8.3.

The third-highest source of stress is teacher shortages, which has jumped from 11th place in 2015. Its mean score for stress has increased from 5.1 to 8.3. Mean stress scores have increased in 15 of the 19 categories; the significant increase in the mean score for students' mental health issues is a particular cause for concern.

Concluding thoughts

In his address at the IPPN Principals' Conference in 2015, Professor Riley concluded from the data that:

You have all the attributes of people who should be scoring well above average on these measures, but you are collectively below the average. This means it is very likely to be the demands of the job that are causing this.

Given the increased scores for negative health and wellbeing outcomes, and the increased sources-of-stress scores in the 2022 data, it is clear that the current reality of school leadership in Ireland is taking a significant toll on our school leaders' health and wellbeing – and that the situation is getting worse. At the time of writing this article, the draft reports from the 2023 study confirmed a further deterioration in the negative health and wellbeing scores, prompting the researchers to conclude:

Mental health issues among Irish primary school leaders are not only prevalent but also likely to be intensifying, signalling an urgent need for targeted interventions to improve their wellbeing.

Rahimi and Arnold (2022) conclude:

Overall, there is a need for all stakeholders to make school leadership work roles and responsibilities more manageable. School leaders reported 'sheer quantity of work', 'a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning' and 'teacher shortages' as the top three major sources of stress. The analysis determined that there was a strong association between school leaders who felt that work had a significant impact on their home lives and experiences of both high burnout and high stress. The key job demands were also associated with both stress and burnout. Urgent action is required to provide school leaders with adequate support and ensure that they are given the time and resources to fulfil the obligations of the role.

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The report makes a definitive recommendation in this regard:

This report presents compelling evidence that many Irish [...] 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.

This is in keeping with the findings and conclusions drawn by Burke and Dempsey (2021):

It is now time to review leaders' loaded role and identify ways in which it can be altered to positively impact on their wellbeing, ensure sustainability of the position, as well as ensure that they have the time and space to focus on rebuilding the ruptured school communities for a brighter post-Covid future.

They recommend that it is time to:

- » review and clarify school leaders' role
- » streamline the role by centralising some of their duties
- » provide leaders with more time to manage the quality of teaching and learning.

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