

Submission on
DES Action Plan 2016 - 2019
2017 Priorities

Prepared for:
Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, TD
Department of Education & Skills

Prepared by:
Irish Primary Principals' Network

November 2016

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1. INTRODUCTION

The *Programme for a Partnership Government May 2016* and the related Department of Education *Action Plan 2016-2019* set out a large number of proposals. IPPN has already made submissions to the Department in relation to both sets of plans, highlighting those aspects we agree with, those we see as somewhat problematic, as well as key omissions. Furthermore, IPPN's stated priorities as an organisation are outlined in our October 2015 submission to the DES – *Principals' Priorities for Education Budget 2016*, which are included here in Appendix I.

In IPPN's view, while comprehensive, the government and DES' plans don't go far enough in some key areas, and represent a missed opportunity. This is particularly true in terms of supporting and empowering school leadership, the very people who are needed, on a day to day basis, to support, manage and implement *all* system change as it affects schools. IPPN is very much a solution-oriented organisation with a wealth of leadership expertise and research material that the Minister and the Department can tap into. Conscious of the following powerful thought from Professor Fullan, IPPN works tirelessly to achieve our stated mission of 'Empowered Leaders; Inspired Learners'.

'The principal is the nerve centre of school improvement. When principal leadership is strong even the most challenged schools thrive. When it is weak, schools fail or badly underperform.'

- Professor Michael Fullan

2. NEW ACTIONS TO INCLUDE FOR 2017

2.1. NEW ACTIONS

While there are hundreds of actions listed under the various goals and objectives within the Action Plan, very few are aimed at ensuring that school leadership is adequately supported in their role, and in implementing change within schools. IPPN is pleased with the introduction of a new CPD programme for aspiring principals and fully supports the work of the Centre for School Leadership, in which IPPN plays a partnership role, in delivering mentoring and coaching for school leaders. Except for the restoration of middle leadership posts, which will make a significant difference to all school leaders, the challenges of the day-to-day role of school leaders are not dealt with to any great extent.

IPPN strongly supports the key action stated in the Vision section of the Action Plan - 'strengthening school leadership and middle management' as this is the key to achieving all outcomes across the schools sector.

We also very much welcome the Programme for Government commitment (as listed in Appendix 3 of the Plan) to 'examine the potential for measures to assist teaching principals'. Almost six out of every ten principals are teaching principals with a full class teaching role in addition to the crucial school leadership role. The role of Teaching Principal has been highlighted in numerous reports, including those of the DES itself, as being overloaded and unsustainable. This government action hasn't been clearly outlined in the DES Action Plan and should constitute a new action for 2017.

Such an examination would ideally take into account several of IPPN's stated priorities:

- provide additional administration days for teaching principals;
- reduce the threshold for administrative principalship;
- review the staffing schedule in special schools; and
- provide a dignified step-down facility for principals without loss of seniority/pension.

These, together with an equalisation of capitation funding in line with second-level schools and the provision of skilled administration supports to all principals would go a long way towards enabling teaching principals, indeed all principals, to carry out their primary leadership role of leading teaching and learning.

We would hope therefore that these would constitute new actions within the Plan in the coming few years.

3. ACTIONS THAT SHOULD BE PRIORITISED FOR 2017

3.1. EDUCATION PRIORITIES

IPPN welcomes the Department's focus on wellbeing of learners and has played an active part in raising awareness of the need for a culture of wellbeing in all schools. However, there needs to be equal focus on the wellbeing of staff in schools, including principals. There can be no meaningful progress on developing a culture of wellbeing unless those charged with its implementation are themselves looked after in terms of wellbeing.

IPPN also agrees that increased autonomy would, over time and with the necessary supports, resources and training, enable schools to function more effectively. However, the lack of expertise and resources available to Boards of Management in relation to finance, education and employment law, HR administration, building and other management accountabilities will constrain schools in embracing increased autonomy. Certainly, providing inadequate budget and resources to schools and saying they are now autonomous and all decisions rest with the school will not work!

Helping those delivering education services to continuously improve is a laudable aim and the focus on lifelong learning is welcome. However, this needs to be balanced with support for the leadership of learning in schools, and principals will need professional development themselves in this area to maximise the benefit and outcomes. All such CPD needs to be available with substitute cover and teachers need to receive CPD themselves directly, not delivered to them by their principal.

The focus on improving DEIS and SEN provision is to be commended. IPPN has been involved in consultation regarding these provisions and hopeful that our concerns in relation to administration and resources will be listened to and acted upon as a priority.

All actions and plans relating to ICT must be preceded by the full roll-out of adequate broadband in ALL primary schools. Without this, any Digital Strategy remains impossible for schools to implement.

3.2. SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PRIORITIES

IPPN's recent submission clarifies the key priorities affecting school leadership, which in turn have a significant impact on school and pupil outcomes. To reiterate, these priorities are:

1. Minimum of one administration day per week for Teaching Principals
2. Improve the pupil/teacher ratio
3. Increase the Capitation Grant
4. Restore full resource hours
5. Restore middle leadership posts
6. Reduce the threshold for administrative principalship
7. Revise the staffing schedule for special schools
8. Dignified step-down facility for principals without loss of seniority/pension
9. Children's Emotional Wellbeing
10. Information Technology and Digital Learning in Primary Schools.

Further information about each of these priorities is provided in Appendix I.

4. HOW SHOULD ACTIONS BE MEASURED

4.1. METRICS USED IN THE ACTION PLAN

IPPN welcomes the clarity of the targets and indicators set out in the Action Plan. For the most part, the objectives are 'SMART' – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound. We believe that this approach will strengthen the way the Department plans and assesses its own work and will be helpful as a communication tool with external parties, including IPPN, in raising awareness of the Department's own priorities and plans. Indeed IPPN has undertaken a similar process recently and documented our own Strategic Plan 'IPPN 2020' to clarify and communicate our vision, mission and goals in a concrete way.

In some cases, we feel that key items within objectives have been set out with a very limited focus. The DES' objective to enhance wellbeing in our school communities is an objective that we share. Indeed IPPN has made this a priority area in our own Strategic Plan 'IPPN 2020'. However, we feel that the Department is so focused on student/learner wellbeing that the staff who are expected to deliver ALL of the objectives relating to schools are omitted almost entirely, particularly when the specific measures, targets and indicators for this objective are reviewed. Not a single metric is aimed at ensuring that *staff* are supported in their own health and wellbeing. This is surely counterproductive and a key omission.

Furthermore, CPD metrics that provide solely for a particular number of events will not be a true measure of success. Key performance indicators for Continuous Professional Development should include the extent to which participants' skills and understanding have increased as a result of attending or participating in a CPD programme. This would require benchmarking of skills and competencies prior to commencement of each programme and a review and comparison after the programme. Attendee feedback should also be included to ensure that each programme is reviewed and improved to meet the needs of participants. Similar metrics could be applied to wellbeing – awareness, personal wellbeing can be measured before and after a programme is rolled out to ensure outcomes are as expected.

Finally, metrics regarding resource inputs are useful - to compare trends in investment over time in particular areas and across sectors, for example. However, these need to be balanced with metrics about outputs and outcomes to ensure that cost/benefit and return on investment, which are often ignored in the public sector, are analysed and this information used to inform future policy decisions, plans and priorities. This would be a valid counterpoint to the input-based measurement system that applies today.

APPENDIX 1: IPPN KEY PRIORITIES

IPPN's stated priorities as outlined in our submission to the DES in October 2015 – *Principals' Priorities for Education Budget 2016*:

Minimum of one administration day per week for Teaching Principals

60% of primary principals are currently teaching full-time in addition to their leadership role. They have between 15 and 25 days 'administration' time from teaching to work on all of the tasks and responsibilities of school leadership. In simple terms, a principal with 178 pupils teaches a class 168 days a year (183 days minus 15 'administration' days) whereas a principal with 179 pupils does not teach at all. IPPN propose that a 'stepped' approach is followed for administration days.

The current situation is unsustainable. Numerous IPPN studies (and the DES' own reports) confirm this. Teaching Principals are far more likely to feel stressed, require medical intervention and take early retirement. They 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 two days per week (used flexibly to meet the needs of the school). Principals in the Republic need a similar level of substitute cover/administration 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.

Improve the pupil/teacher ratio

We look forward to hearing more details regarding the proposed reduction in the P/T ratio in infant classes. 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. This is why principals have asked for the maximum class size to be prioritised ahead of most other aspects of primary education. Where the class size is manageable, children have more equitable access to education and teachers can lead learning in their classrooms more effectively.

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. 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. It is hoped that the current proposals will achieve this restoration in the short term.

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 some of the resource hours that had been cut. Irrespective of what model is put in place, full resource hours need to be reinstated.

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 posts of responsibility disproportionately affected schools with senior staff members

who retired not being replaced. Many schools have had their entire management team wiped out, with the exception of the Deputy Principal post. Middle Leadership could 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.

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 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 145 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.

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 proved 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.

Dignified step-down facility for principals without loss of seniority/pension

Currently, the only option for principals who, for whatever reason, feel that they can no longer give of their best 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.

Children's Emotional Wellbeing

A succession of IPPN surveys have uncovered continuing disturbing increases in the levels of depression, anxiety, emotional trauma and neglect amongst primary school-going children. Allied to the increasingly strong influence of social media and cyber-bullying, children are being exposed to levels of pressure that they may not have experienced before. Health effects, such as childhood obesity, have associated self-esteem implications and can become very real issues in our schools today.

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IPPN is calling for the provision of resources to establish and embed a culture in all schools whereby all children feel safe to express their anxieties and develop emotional resilience to meet the challenges they face as they go through life. IPPN also advises that provision is made for the appointment of additional NEPS psychologists to support schools. Early detection and prevention of issues affecting emotional wellbeing at primary school age is much more effective and inexpensive than seeking to provide a cure or addressing the same issues further down the track.

Information Technology and Digital Learning in Primary Schools

Multi-national and Irish employers are consistently alerting government to the impact on our economy arising from the shortage of science and technology skills. Irish primary education is at least a decade behind virtually all other OECD countries in relation to ICT provision and usage.

IPPN strongly recommends that the provision of a multi-annual budget for ICT in schools is put in place. An integrated ICT-supported curriculum must be put in place to enable Ireland to keep pace with our OECD neighbours and competitors. A decision needs to be taken to teach a number of subjects e.g. science or maths, through the medium of technology from Junior Infants to Leaving Certificate level. For this to become a reality, government must ensure that all schools have access to high speed broadband and technical support.