

SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP

The E-publication can be downloaded here. [LINK](#)

The case for urgent action

THE CURRENT REALITY

IPPN's Sustainable Leadership report was issued to members and stakeholders by email on 17th November. The report is structured as follows:

- ❖ 1. Context
- ❖ 2. Current Reality
- ❖ 3. Effective School Leadership & Core Purpose
- ❖ 4. Preparation for Leadership
- ❖ 5. Recruitment
- ❖ 6. Time and Space to Lead
- ❖ 7. Sharing and Supporting Leadership
- ❖ 8. Governance
- ❖ In Conclusion

The following is taken from the *Current Reality* chapter. We encourage all members and stakeholders to read the report in its entirety. Each chapter stands on its own merits, thus the report can be read in whichever order you wish. Members can access the report under Advocacy/Publications on www.ippn.ie.

INTRODUCTION

There is a largely unaddressed, if not unspoken, crisis relating to the sustainability of school leadership in Irish primary schools. In order to understand the extent, causes and impact of this crisis, we have endeavoured to explore how leadership is practised and experienced in our primary schools, informed by the data we have garnered from our member survey, to which over 1,000 school leaders responded.

We asked those school leaders to rate the current sustainability of their leadership role (0 being totally unsustainable and 10 being fully sustainable). Per Figure 1, their responses tell us that:

- ❖ school leaders rate the level of

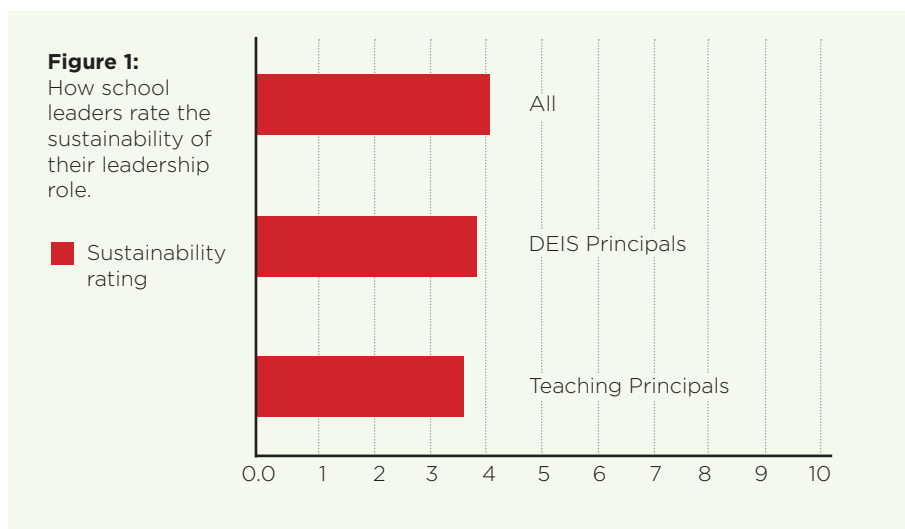


Figure 1: How school leaders rate the sustainability of their leadership role.

- ❖ sustainability of their leadership roles at just less than 4 (3.96)
- ❖ principals of DEIS schools rate the level of sustainability of their leadership roles at just 3.76
- ❖ teaching principals rate the level of sustainability of their leadership roles at just 3.53
- ❖ 26.3% of school leaders rated the sustainability of their leadership role at 0, 1 or 2.

The focus of this report is to understand:

- ❖ why so many of those who are tasked with one of the most strategically important roles in education, and a key determinant of a school's effectiveness, are struggling to sustain themselves in those roles
- ❖ what are the factors that are undermining that sustainability
- ❖ what is the impact on their leadership practice
- ❖ what are the implications for their health and well-being and
- ❖ what can be done to render school leadership roles more sustainable.

RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Our member survey indicates that, in the last five years, there has been a change of leadership in 39% of the schools that responded and that, in 60% of those cases, the principal had not reached the age of retirement, but rather was stepping away from their leadership role early or to a different role. We further ascertained from our survey that the average number of applications received for those vacant principal positions was 5.5 (See Figure 2) and that in 7% of cases the role had to be re-advertised. It is also interesting to note from our analysis of the data from the EducationPosts.ie website that, of the 376 ads placed for principals in the period from 1st September 2021 to 31st August 2022, 60 were re-advertised. This constitutes a re-advertising of 16% of principal posts.

In terms of retention, just less than one of every two school leaders (48%) who responded indicated that they were either highly likely or likely to be in their current role in 5 years' time. Of this cohort:

- ❖ 9% said it was because they were thriving in their current role

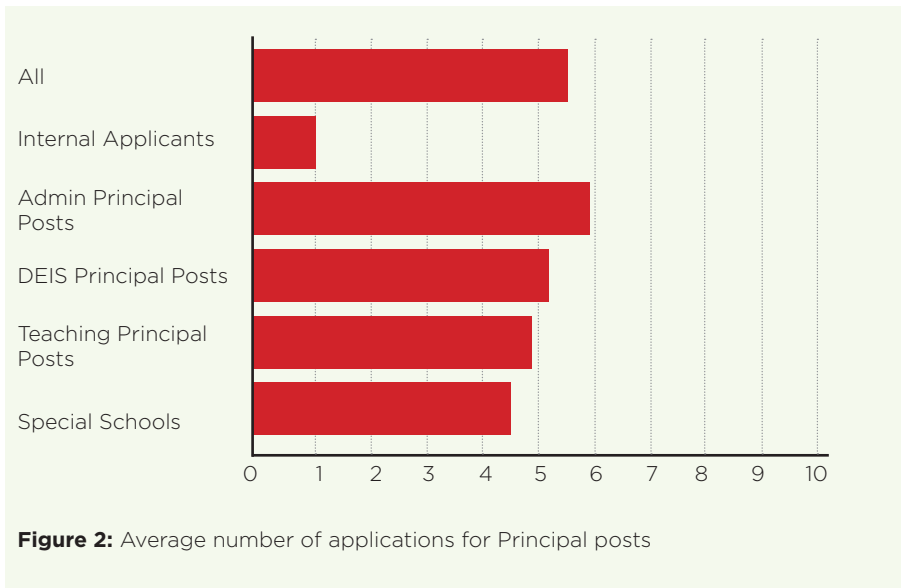


Figure 2: Average number of applications for Principal posts

- ❖ 53% said it was because they were committed to leading their school
- ❖ 52% indicated that they were not in a position to retire
- ❖ 42% cited a lack of alternative roles or positions for which they could apply
- ❖ 38% highlighted the fact that there is no dignified step-down facility.

It should be noted that respondents could choose more than one of the options listed, which serves to further highlight just how few school leaders described themselves as thriving in the role.

Of the 45% who indicated that it was unlikely or highly unlikely that they would be in their current role in 5 years' time:

- ❖ 29% said it was because they were due to retire in the next 5 years
- ❖ 29% said it was because they would take early retirement in the next 5 years
- ❖ 8% said it was because they hoped to be in a leadership role in a different school
- ❖ 15% said it was because they hoped to be seconded to another agency/body
- ❖ 15% said it was because they were not thriving in their current role and would resign their position.

In order to develop a deeper understanding of why school leaders experience their roles as unsustainable, it is necessary to explore the context in which school leadership is practised in Ireland, which is characterised,

through our work with members by:

- ❖ a lack of role clarity
- ❖ increasing role complexity
- ❖ the breadth of responsibilities
- ❖ inadequate infrastructural supports and
- ❖ the workload that arises from all of the above.

LACK OF ROLE CLARITY

The role of the principal, and indeed that of the deputy principal, lacks definition and no coherent overview of such responsibilities exists. This is a prevailing fundamental issue and should be a baseline for improving both leadership capacity and the sustainability of that leadership.

The last time the role of the principal was addressed by Departmental circular was in 1973. The publication of the Quality Framework for Leadership and Management in *Looking at Our Schools: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* (2016), with its domains, standards and statements of effective and highly effective practice, was a welcome development, although not reflective of the totality of roles school leaders currently undertake. Without being prescriptive, it identifies the core purpose and activities of effective school leaders.

It is IPPN's belief that if school leaders were enabled to maintain their focus on that core purpose and not diverted from it by tasks, functions and responsibilities that are not in keeping with that core purpose, it would have a significant and positive impact on

the effectiveness and sustainability of their leadership.

This assertion is corroborated by the data from our survey as an unequivocal **97%** of school leaders who responded either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'The key issue that undermines the sustainability of my leadership role is the number of tasks and responsibilities that divert my attention away from my core purpose as a school leader'.

COMPLEXITY OF THE ROLE

It is broadly recognised and accepted that there are both leadership and management dimensions to the role. It is important to acknowledge that leadership and management are two completely separate and demanding roles requiring fundamentally different skillsets and competencies. If there is no shared understanding of what constitutes effective school leadership and no requirement for school leaders to have undertaken any formal preparation for leadership, there is no guarantee that those who are appointed to school leadership roles have those differing skillsets and competencies.

Schools that are over-managed and under-led are likely to be stagnant and lacking innovation, while schools that are over-led and under-managed are likely to be chaotic and lacking cohesion. A balanced exercising of both dimensions of the role is crucial but not easily achieved. Those tasked with the challenge of recruiting school leaders must be acutely aware of this.

BREADTH OF RESPONSIBILITIES

Since the role of the principal was last defined by circular in 1973, successive pieces of legislation, circulars, policies, guidelines and new initiatives have identified and leveraged the strategic importance of the role in terms of effecting reform and improvement, both at a school level and within the system. Each identifies the particular responsibilities that fall to school leadership.

In order to ascertain the exact breadth of these responsibilities, we have analysed all active circulars for the period 2016 to 2022, as well as all of the key policy initiatives and guidance documents arising from education legislation, and logged the duties and responsibilities that are

ascribed to school leadership. The period from 2016 for the analysis of circulars was chosen as the *Looking at our Schools* policy document, with its quality framework for leadership and management, was published in 2016. If that quality framework forms the basis of how leadership should be practised, it is reasonable to analyse duties and responsibilities in that context. In total, 162 documents were reviewed. Our analysis details the year-on-year expansion of the role that has arisen for school leaders because of this approach.

In addition to an analysis of role and responsibilities, we also reviewed the documents to identify into which of the domains from the *Quality Framework for Leadership & Management* the responsibilities fell. The results of that review are detailed in the table below.

The review identifies a disproportionate focus on Managing the Organisation in terms of the responsibilities ascribed to school leaders. This disproportionate focus on management undermines the capacity of principals to deliver on the leadership dimension of their role and their core purpose – leading teaching and learning.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the review:

1. The **strategic importance of the principal** in effecting change has been **recognised and leveraged** by the system
2. Education legislation, policy guidelines, circulars, information letters and administration requirements **identify specific responsibilities** that fall to the principal
3. The cumulative impact of this expansion of the role of the principal has led to a **considerable and expanding workload**

4. The **disproportionate focus on management/administrative tasks** diverts principals from their key leadership responsibilities and undermines their effectiveness as instructional leaders
5. The **Board of Management’s responsibility** to exercise its duty of care to its employee (the principal) **is compromised**, as it does not control the role, responsibilities and consequential workload of the principal. The DE, as paymaster, retains this control.
6. The **lack of capacity** of many Boards of Management to discharge their increasingly complex governance responsibilities further undermines the sustainability of school leadership.

INADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURAL SUPPORTS

The sustainability of school leadership is potentially further compromised by inadequate infrastructural supports, which include:

- ❖ insufficient administrative support (at the school and system levels)
- ❖ inadequate funding
- ❖ the challenge of inclusion without adequate resourcing
- ❖ reduced in-school leadership and management posts
- ❖ a governance structure that may not have the capacity to discharge its onerous responsibilities. There is a separate chapter in the report which looks at governance.

Insufficient administrative support

Effective school leadership requires adequate administrative support. It is the view of IPPN that all schools should have appropriate levels of skilled administrative support available to them. It is unconscionable that any school would be without any administrative support and inequitable that primary schools

that are the equivalent size as post-primary schools, both in pupil and staff numbers, would have such an inferior level of administrative support available to them. Furthermore, it should be reasonable to expect that, in discharging administrative duties that require the support of the Department or other state agencies, such support should be readily accessible and provided in a timely manner. This is currently not the case and leads to a diminution of the efficiency and effectiveness of school leaders.

In an appendix to the report, we detail how this administrative burden could be alleviated with a consequential positive impact on leadership effectiveness. The appendix shows that sufficient administrative capacity to share certain administrative tasks with an adequately skilled and trained person would enable school leaders to focus on tasks and activities more in keeping with their core purpose of leading teaching and learning. The consequent impact on the workload and the wellbeing of school leaders would be considerable.

Inadequate funding

The capitation grant received from the Department for the running of primary schools is not sufficient to meet the actual running costs. In its pre-budget submission for Budget 2021, the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) cites research undertaken by Grant Thornton in 2018 which “shows that the capitation grant which is meant to pay for the day to day running costs of schools and the provision of educational materials, on average covers just over half of school running costs.” To meet that shortfall, school leaders often have to resort to fundraising activities, which place an unfair burden on parents. School leaders report significant cash flow issues caused by the manner

| Leadership & Management Domain | No. of documents/circulars with duties in each domain | % of documents/circulars with duties in each domain |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Leading Teaching & Learning | 40 | 25% |
| Managing the Organisation | 162 | 100% |
| Leading School Development | 29 | 18% |
| Developing Leadership Capacity | 22 | 14% |

and timing of how grants are paid as well as heightened levels of stress at having to find ways of stretching and supplementing budgets.

In their *'Wellbeing in Post-Covid Schools: Primary school leaders' Reimagining of the Future'* research, Burke and Dempsey detail some of the stressors for school leaders that are directly linked to inadequate financial resourcing. These include ongoing difficulties in funding:

- ❖ basic services such as cleaning and requisites
- ❖ teaching/curricular materials/resources
- ❖ the cost of ancillary staff – insufficient grant aid to fund the level of support required
- ❖ supports for children whose families cannot pay for the 'extras' e.g. buses, school trips, swimming etc.
- ❖ ICT-related resources and support
- ❖ training and CPD for staff
- ❖ accounting, auditing and payroll services
- ❖ basic maintenance of buildings and grounds.

The challenge of inclusion without adequate and/or timely resourcing

IPPN fully supports the principle of ensuring equal access to quality inclusive education for all learners. This inclusion must be planned, supported and resourced. However, the way in which the model of inclusion is currently implemented, supported and resourced compromises the very nature and efficacy of that inclusion. Either children have needs or they don't. Either those needs are met or they are not. Where needs are not met, there is a consequential impact for that child and, indeed, the other children in that class. The system currently does not respond quickly or comprehensively to need. As things stand, children are placed in classes without any guarantees that the requisite supports will be put in place. School leaders also deal with the fallout when it does not work. It is a significant stressor and a contributor to increased workload.

Schools cannot make up for a shortfall in the provision of supports that children with additional needs require to learn and thrive in school. The heavy bureaucracy, the lack of transparency in decision-making, the excessive time taken to arrive at a decision and the

level of unmet need have all been highlighted by many organisations, including by IPPN in its submission to the NCSE in May 2021.

Every primary school supports children with additional needs and/or those at risk of educational disadvantage. Where adequate teaching and SNA resources, equipment and learning resources are provided, these pupils can thrive and reach their full potential, which is at the heart of every primary school's ethos and mission. When these resources and supports are not forthcoming, the school is left to manage as best they can. This causes significant frustration and stress for the school, as well as for the parents and the children, as clearly outcomes for individual children are compromised.

It is clear from research, including the Irish Principal and Deputy Principal Health and Well-being survey and the previously mentioned Burke & Dempsey report, that the management of additional needs in schools is a significant contributor to work overload and stress for primary principals, and needs to be addressed to make the role more sustainable.

IPPN understands and accepts that identifying and meeting additional need is complex and requires significant investment of resources and systemic planning. IPPN also acknowledges that significant investment has been made in meeting additional needs, with Budget 2023 allocating an additional 686 teaching posts and an additional 1,194 special needs assistant posts across the primary and post-primary sectors to support inclusion of children with special education needs. However, in the absence of an up-to-date and accurate dataset detailing the level of need presenting in our schools, it is impossible to state that the level of resources allocated will be sufficient to meet the actual level of need. This ongoing tension undermines the capacity of school leaders to maintain a focus on inclusive best practice.

Reduced in-school leadership and management posts

The question might reasonably be asked as to whether the burden of responsibility school leaders face could be reduced by the pursuit

of a model of shared leadership described in Circulars 0070/2018 and 0044/2019. Most school leaders would enthusiastically embrace that shared model of leadership, but it presupposes that there are sufficient numbers with whom that leadership can be shared. The significant reduction of posts in those leadership and management teams has limited the scope for distributed or shared leadership. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that in-school management teams can make the transition to being leadership and management teams without structured support and access to professional development and learning. The importance of sharing leadership is explored in detail in the report, in terms of both school effectiveness and leadership sustainability.

WORKLOAD

The significant workload arising from all of the foregoing, for all school leaders, is evident. The management aspects of the role have undermined and limited instructional and transformational leadership capacity. Management, and the administrative tasks associated with it, are urgent and incessantly emergent therefore leading learning is compromised as it cannot compete with the urgency of the other duties.

It is the view of IPPN, arising from our direct engagement with our members, that schools are policy overloaded, curriculum overloaded, initiative overloaded, programme overloaded, additional duties overloaded, reporting overloaded, planning overloaded and recording overloaded. Workloads cannot remain the same – they must be decreased, not redistributed, if any real positive growth and change is expected in terms of leadership effectiveness and sustainability.

In this context, it must also be noted that 54% of primary school principals are teaching principals, who are expected to discharge their responsibilities effectively as class or Special Education teachers while also attending to their duties as principals. How can they be expected to discharge the responsibilities attending to the leadership and management dimensions of their role without being afforded the requisite time and opportunity to do so? The personal and professional toll this is taking on

our teaching principal colleagues is explored in the report.

The inequity of this situation is exacerbated by the fact that these school leaders are resourced, and remunerated, in accordance with the number of mainstream class teaching posts in the school. No account is taken of the actual number of staff the school leader is leading and managing, such as teams of SNAs, bus escorts, administration and cleaning/maintenance staff, who are not considered when calculating whether a principal or deputy should have administrative status. The current method of using pupil numbers to determine such status is no longer fit for purpose.

IMPACT ON HEALTH & WELLBEING

In response to concerns that the increasing complexity and workload demands of school leadership roles are impacting on the health and well-being of Irish school leaders, IPPN commissioned a specific piece of research in partnership with our sister organisation at post-primary level – the National Association of Principals and Deputies (NAPD).

The focus of the research project was on the occupational health, safety and wellbeing of school leaders in Ireland and was conducted by a team from Deakin University, Melbourne, in March/April 2022. The data gleaned from this research (see Figure 3) revealed that the incidence of burnout, stress and depressive symptoms among Irish primary school leaders was almost double that of the healthy working population and more than double for sleeping troubles and cognitive stress.

HEALTH & WELLBEING OUTCOMES 2022

Also notable was that the scores for burnout, stress, sleeping troubles, depressive symptoms, somatic stress and cognitive stress have all increased since the last study undertaken in 2015.

The two highest sources of stress at work were identical to the top two identified in the 2015 study, namely quantity of work and lack of time to focus on teaching and learning (see Figure 4). However, in both cases, the stress rating has increased from 2015.

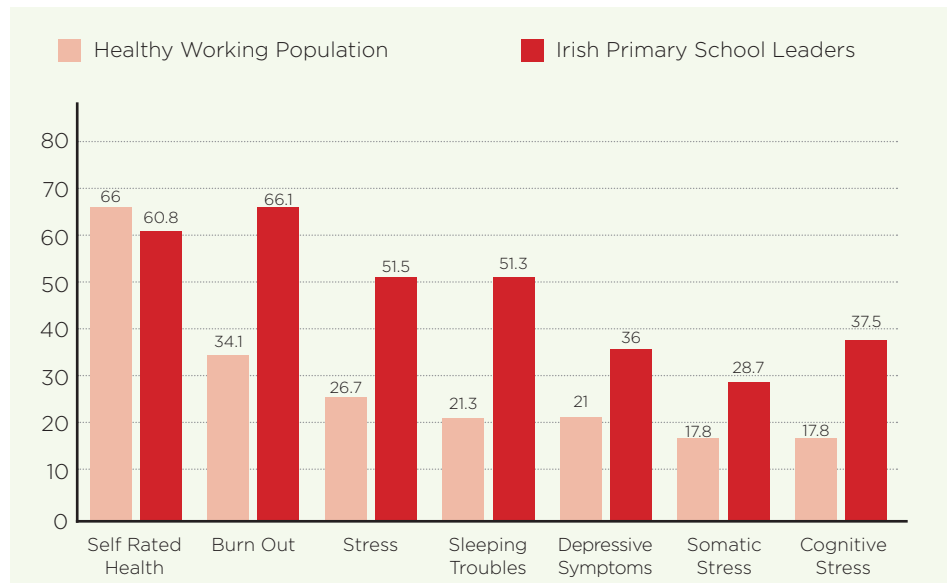


Figure 3: Health & Wellbeing Outcomes 2022

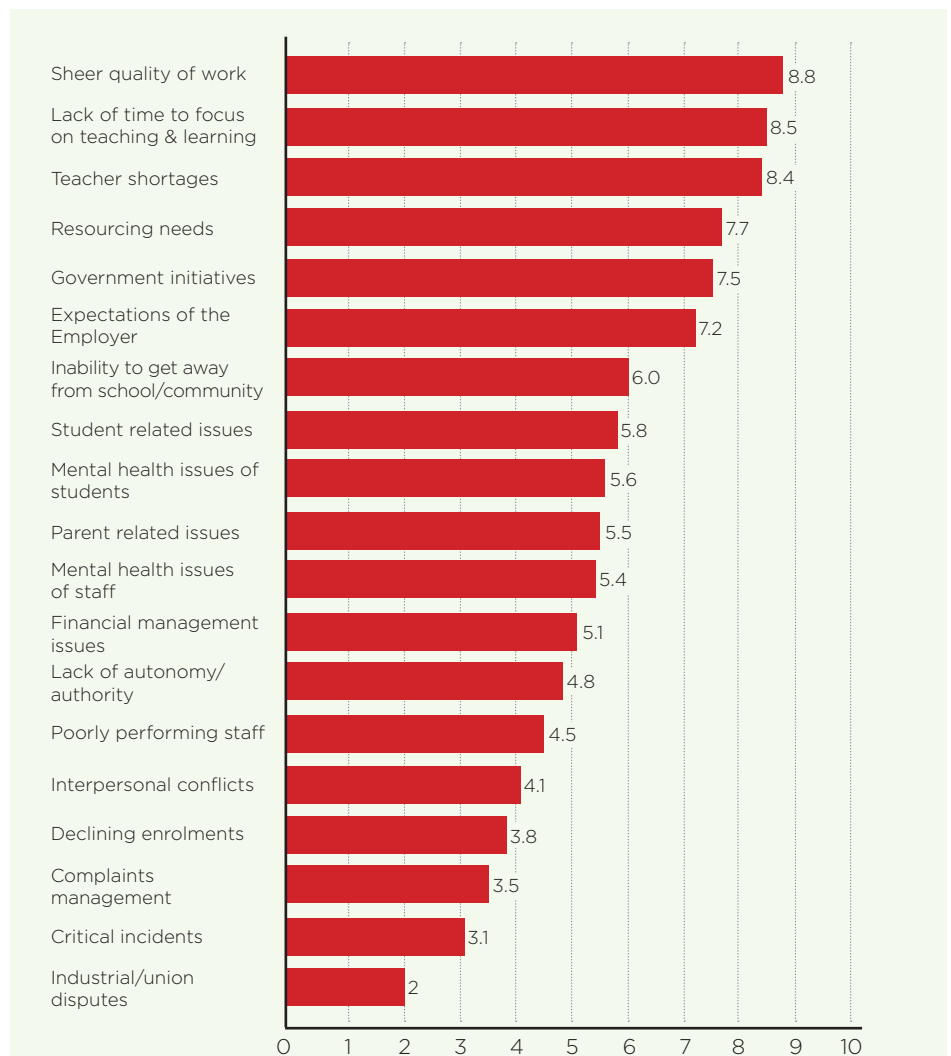


Figure 4: Sources of Stress 2022 (Primary School Leaders)

highest source of stress is teacher shortages, which has jumped from 13th place on the list of stressors in 2015. Its mean score for stress has more than doubled from 4.08 to 8.4.

Given the increased scores for negative health and wellbeing outcomes, and the increased sources of stress scores reported in the 2022 data, it is clear that the current reality of primary school leadership in Ireland is taking a significant toll on the health and wellbeing of our school leaders, and that the situation is getting worse over time. This is further compromising the sustainability of school leadership roles.

The report makes a definitive recommendation in this regard: *“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.”

CONCLUSION

In order to ensure school leadership of the highest quality in our schools, and a leadership role that is sustainable and less likely to have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of school leaders, the report gives consideration to the following:

- ❖ the development of a shared understanding of what constitutes effective school leadership and the core purpose of that leadership
- ❖ the extent to which school leaders are deflected from their core purpose by having to take on responsibilities and tasks not related to that purpose
- ❖ the skills, knowledge and competencies school leaders require to enable them to be effective
- ❖ the need for a systematic process of preparation for leadership and what it might look like
- ❖ how the process by which school leaders are recruited could be improved
- ❖ how to ensure all school leaders are afforded sufficient time and space to exercise both the leadership and management dimensions to their roles
- ❖ 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 reimagined.

