The Challenge of
Recruiting and Retaining
School Leaders

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The Challenges

Research evidence shows that there is an emerging crisis in recruiting and retaining Principals in Irish Primary Schools. The average age of school principals is climbing, rates of application for school principalship are falling and the difficulties, the negative perceptions of the role and pay anomalies remain unaddressed – leading to "leadership disengagement" (Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei 2003). There are significant limitations in training and development which, according to Mulford, is a fundamental reason for the shortage in the number and quality of candidates. In addition, there is an overall absence of succession or human resource planning, whereby insufficient attention is given to developing the pipeline of suitably qualified candidates and whereby principals rarely identify or groom successors (McGuinness, 2005).

Consider the facts: The rate of application for the post of principal is falling. In a study conducted by IPPN in Ireland in 2005, the stark evidence was highlighted. In 1996 the rate of applications for principalships was 5.9 applications per vacant post. By 2005, this had fallen to 2.3 applications per vacant post. One school advertised for the post of principal, there was 1 applicant. The same school advertised a teaching post and received 357 applications! This trend is consistent throughout the Country.

In a survey of over 1500 teachers - '*Attitudes and Aspirations towards the Role of Principal*' (IPPN, 2005), over half said they "would not apply for the post of principal at some stage in their career", with a further fifth undecided. Interestingly, those involved in school middle management were no more likely than other teachers to apply for principalship. It might have been expected (certainly hoped) that the deputy principal and other middle management team members would be more positive about the role of principal given that they are involved in the running of the school, however this is not the case.

The huge disparity between males and females as regards those who said they would Definitely apply - 22% of males vs. 9% of females, is quite shocking. Overall, females were less likely to apply but the differential is far less marked in the other responses. Perhaps surprisingly, those who are carers (of adults or children) were no less likely to apply for principalship, with almost the same responses across genders. So the discrepancy between males and females *cannot* be fully explained by family commitments as might be assumed to be the case. The factors behind these answers are outlined in the following two sections.

The perceptions of the role of principal seem to be largely negative, with many respondents to the "Attitudes and Aspirations" survey stating they feel the role is "un-doable" or "not worth the reward". Left unchecked, these perceptions will further reduce the numbers applying for leadership roles. The combination of principals struggling with workload, increasing age profile and the lack of interest in the role among the teaching population is leading rapidly towards a leadership time-bomb.

Barriers and Inhibitors

So what are the reasons for the lack of interest in principalship and the pervasiveness of negative perceptions? Our research shows that teachers are keen observers of the principals to whom they report and are quite aware of the difficulties of the role. These observations have led them to conclude that there are significant issues that influence them when considering whether to apply for the role of principal at some stage in their career:

	Dissuading Factors
1	Vast workload and ever-increasing responsibility with a consequent negative impact on the health, welfare and personal life of the Principal.
2	Imbalance between the level of responsibility divested in the role of Principal and the level of autonomy/authority/resources the Principal 'enjoys'.
3	Administration and management functions take up an increasing proportion of a Principal's day which provides less opportunity to influence the teaching and learning that most Principals see as their primary role. Good teachers do not want to see themselves as administrators and managers.
4	The concept of distributed leadership through middle management structures exists yet the current practice has not delivered a real distribution of leadership. Resistance to change has proved to be yet another aspect for Principals to manage.
5	Inadequate training and development both for teachers who may aspire to school leadership and for Principals in the role – timing, quality and breadth of professional development programmes all fall short.
6	Lack of support from and an ever-increasing level of expectation by governing bodies, Department of Education, parents, teachers and the general public.
7	The salary differential does not reflect the additional workload and responsibility.

In the Republic of Ireland, 7 out of 10 Principals are also required to teach a class of children full-time - these are referred to as 'Teaching Principals'. Research shows that a key issue for teachers when considering whether to apply for the role of principal at some stage in their career is the difficulty in combining teaching duties as well as the duties of a principal.

Other academic studies are in line with these findings. The literature refers to:

- the lack of succession or human resource planning in education systems (Mulford)

- lack of training and development, whereby teachers feel unprepared for the role of principal. Bolam et al (2000)

- the job is not 'doable', fulfilling a multiplicity of demanding roles is unreasonable to expect of one person. The top priority for principalship must be leadership for student learning, however, current principals find little in their professional development to prepare them for the role. Gates et al. (2004)

- Mulford also suggests a number of reasons why applications may be reluctant to apply for vacant posts:
    - Societal problems
    - unrelenting change
    - increased and conflicting expectations
    - diminishing public support for schools and teachers
    - accountability policies
    - bureaucracy
    - funding issues
    - the demands of the job, vague job definition – responsibility without the authority, long hours
    - unceasing demands by politicians, the public and parents for improved outcomes
    - poor financial rewards.

Enablers and Persuaders

It must be stated that the research to date has been largely focussed on the barriers to recruitment, the difficulties of the leadership role and the strategies that are required to overcome these. There is far less emphasis on the positive dimensions of the role, nor has it explored in any detail the job satisfaction which many principals also experience (McGuinness 2005). There is a danger of the looming crisis becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy unless steps are taken to redress the balance and highlight and promote the reasons why many principals are happy and fulfilled in their role.

In a 2004 survey on Principals' Workload conducted by IPPN, many principals stated that, despite the complexity and the difficulties of the role, they love the job. Among the reasons cited are the opportunity to positively influence young people, the creativity and teamwork of the teaching staff, the variety of their work, the interaction with pupils, parents and the wider school community.

In the survey on "Attitudes and Aspirations towards the role of Principal", teachers who indicated their intention to apply for Principalship identified the key factors why they "would apply for promotion to School Leadership".

	Persuading Factors
1	Keen to influence school culture
2	Desire to become leader of a school community
3	Career promotion opportunity
4	Believe the role offers more variety than that of class teacher
5	Would like a change of direction in my career
6	Impressed by current experience of school leadership and wish to fulfill similar role
7	Have completed academic study that prepares for role of Principal
8	Dissatisfied with current experience of school leadership

Additional persuading factors, collated from free format responses were:

- Want to make "a difference"
- Ambition/ Career progression
- Believe they have skills/experience
- Wish to flee the classroom!
- Enhanced Status

Strategies to remove the barriers and inhibitors

The following matrix sets out the factors inhibiting teachers from applying for leadership roles and some proposed strategies to address these.

These have been collated from:

- Survey of Primary School teachers on "Attitudes and Aspirations towards the role of Principal" - IPPN (2005)

- Papers presented at International Confederation of Principals' Symposium 2005: "The Challenge of Recruiting and Retaining School Leaders", particularly those presented by Professor John Coolahan and Dr Seamus McGuinness

- Professor Michael Fullan's paper: "Quality Leadership ⇔ Quality Learning"

- Irish survey of primary principals on "Principals Workload" - IPPN (2004).

Perceived/Real Inhibitors	Identified by	Proposed actions/ strategies	For action by
1. Principalship, particularly Teaching Principalship, is considered to be 'un-doable'	Teachers and Principals, international survey	- Clusters and federations of schools to share and leverage resources & skills - IT solutions to replace outdated paper-based systems and remove data duplication - Every school to have secretarial and caretaker resources (budget) provided - Ensure resources required by schools to implement any new initiatives/legislation are provided in full - Provide adequately resourced help-lines for various Department of Education initiatives - Support and training for distributed leadership, including but not exclusively Middle Management - See also 11 below.	Department of Education

2.	Insufficient attention given to identifying and nurturing potential leaders, too much reliance on self-selection by teachers	Academic community	• Create process to enable potential future school leaders to build skills and prepare for leadership • Create a School Leadership Development Framework (to foster interest in leadership roles and develop leadership skills) – taking a teacher from qualification to beyond appointment to principalship • Support and encourage job shadowing by teachers of Principals to learn about the role and participate in distributed leadership •	Department of Education, Trade Union, Principals' Association
3.	Appointment procedures lack transparency, credibility and "trust".	Research with Teachers	• Professionalise recruitment practices with a focus on the selection and calibre of 'selectors', their accountability and skill sets.	Governing Bodies, Trade Union, Department of Education, Principals' Association
4.	Fear of promotion out of comfort zone.	Research with Teachers	• See 2. above (School Leadership Development Framework) • Three month internship for newly appointed principals; • Structured mentoring programme; • Funded personal and professional development.	Department of Education, Trade Union, Principals' Association
5.	Insufficient appropriate training and development for principals.	Newly appointed principals, experienced principals, teachers	• See 2. above. • Pre- and post-appointment training designed modularly with a blend of on-line and traditional delivery. • Focus on personal development and the emotional intelligences. • Support for appropriate and relevant (to leadership development) academic study / career breaks	Department of Education, Principals' Association

6. Limited promotion prospects	Teachers and principals	• A clear career structure with inter- school promotion options for middle and senior management. • More appropriate middle management appointment procedures and clear roles • Develop human resource (capacity/ succession) planning to determine trends in recruitment of principals • Create process to enable potential future school leaders to build skills and prepare for leadership	Department of Education, Trade Union, Principals' Association, Management Bodies
7. Deputy Principalship more desirable as a role than principalship.	Teachers, Deputy Principals, Principals' Association	• Better definition of deputy principal's role in a team leadership context. • Greater pay differentials between DPs and Principals of even the smallest school.	Department of Education, Principals' Association, Trade Union
8. Inadequate pay for job size and responsibility.	Principals, teachers, Trade Union	• More attractive salaries (in line with similar levels of responsibility in other sectors) with a separate salary structure that is appealing to younger teachers.	Department of Education, Trade Union
9. Principalship is a "life sentence".	Principals, teachers, Principals' Association	• Fixed term contracts e.g. seven years for Principalship, five years for Deputy Principalship etc • Create a step up / step down facility. Pension provision and seniority are the key barriers to be overcome. • Enable and encourage principals to move schools to regain motivation, experience different types of school, leverage existing and develop new skills e.g. rotational leadership within a geographical area. See also 5. above.	Department of Education, Trade Union
10. Unlimited job specification leading to overburdened role	Principals, Teachers, Principals' Association, Trade Union, Management Bodies, Department of Education	• Clear job description with a contract including clarity on what the role does not include. • Greater clarity provided re. reporting relationships both by and to the principal	Department of Education, Trade Union

11. Over-demanding time commitment – not family friendly	Principals	• Place the responsibility on Governing Body and middle management team to monitor and address the impact of the role requirements on the principal.
		
		• Ensure adequate resources in place in all schools
		
		   o secretary/caretaker;
		
		   o full-time deputy principal in schools >= 16 teachers;
		
		   o appointment of administrators to all schools/clusters of schools - to handle all non-educational leadership administration, with secretary and caretaker reporting to administrator. Administrator would report to the principal
		
		   o appointment of classroom assistants to all one-teacher schools
		
		• See also 1. above
			Department of Education, Governing Bodies, School middle management, Trade Union, Principals' Association

12. The role of principal is inevitably dealing with excessive amounts of conflict and constant problem solving – emotionally draining.	Principals	• Effective procedures for dealing with same with clear decision-making authority for principals' dealing with intractable situations, albeit subject to greater levels of transparency and accountability. • Adequate training to develop such skills	Department of Education, Trade Union, Principals' Association
13. Principals carrying responsibility for weak teachers.	Principals, Principals' Association	• Better procedures for dealing with under-performance, strategies for dealing with short term as well as longer term problems in relation to unwilling, unable and 'disabled' teachers.	Department of Education, Trade Union, Principals' Association

14. Isolated role.	Principals	- Scheduled opportunities for principals to network in local clusters. - Professionally competent and accessible support / guidance on legal, financial, HR, Special Ed. Issues. - Structured process for principals to receive feedback in a 'safe' environment.	Principals' Association Networks, Department of Education, Inspectorate
15. Principals operating with inadequate managerial resources	Principals	- Appropriate secretarial back-up with full-time administrators serving large schools or clusters of small schools. - Adequate office space and equipment. - Care-taking resources/ professional resources to support as required - See also 11 above.	Department of Education
16. Middle management structures inadequate to provide support to the school principal.	Principals	- Middle management team appointed through merit-based criteria with focus on team as well as task completion. - Accountability structures in place. - Limited duration contracts, three to five years. - Training and development appropriate to middle management roles.	Department of Education, Trade Union, Principals' Association
17. School governance structures inadequate	Principals' Association, Principals,	- Fundamental overhaul of school governance in certain countries - Professionalise governance function with clustering of small(er) schools as appropriate - Access to legal, HR, construction, financial expertise as required - Clarity of roles of Governing Bodies and Principal re. governance vs. management	Department of Education, Management Bodies

18. Invasion of official holiday time by role demands	Principals, Principals' Association	• Standardisation of principals' holidays. • Annual work/ life balance assessment. • Annual assessment of level of overtime worked by principals - reimbursed at the end of the school year	Department of Education, Trade Union, Principals
19. Stress and health implications for principals.	Principals' Association	• Annual medical assessment • Annual health and safety assessment.	Department of Education
20. Insufficient authority for the level of responsibility	Principals, Principals' Association	• Ensure Principal has a realistic level of autonomy and accountability with sufficient oversight by governing body. Requiring a governing body chairperson to co-sign all school-related cheques is an example of what not to do.	Department of Education, Trade Union
21. Lack of support from staff and general public for the role of principal	Principals, Academic community	• Balance coverage of issues with positive reinforcement of the importance and impact of the role; challenge, variety of work, job satisfaction • Utilise staff meetings to develop a deeper understanding of the role the principal fulfils and foster interest in leadership activity • Utilise the school's website to spread information to the public about all the positive things the school and the principal are doing for the good of the children and wider community e.g. sports, cultural activities, civics etc.	Principals' Association, Principals
22. Negative perceptions pervasive owing to lack of balance re. the difficulties of vs. the importance/satisfaction derived from the role	Academic community, Teachers, Principals' Association	• Resist talking only of the difficulties; highlight also those aspects of the job from which Principals derive satisfaction and which sustain them • Encourage shadowing by teachers of Principals and Deputy Principals to learn about school leadership • Conduct research regarding the positive aspects of the role and the strategies required to improve the image of the role of principal (to provide balance) • Promote positive images in media/ publications aimed at teachers re. principal's role	Trade Union, Principals' Association, Principals