IPPN Survey - Covid-19 Practice in Primary Schools in Ireland Report:

A Two-month Follow-up

This second report, by Dr Jolanta Burke and Dr Majella Dempsey of Maynooth University, highlights:

- the impact of the crisis on the wellbeing of school leaders
- communication with pupils and parents
- additional supports required (over and above those outlined in the previous report shared via e-scéal on 21 May)
- the policy implications of COVID-19 school closures.

Demographics

43% of the c1,000 respondents are administrative principals, 33% are teaching principals and 23% are deputy principals (2% of DPs are administrative, 22% teaching).

It is worth noting that 33 leaders of special schools (of which there are 134) completed the survey.

General Points

In general, school leaders have adapted well to the changes imposed by the school closures. 75% of leaders have made arrangements to contact students daily or every other day, in the March survey the figure was 35%.

The challenges and concerns have changed considerably since the initial research was conducted. They have moved from the practicalities around the continuity of learning and communication tools to concerns about wellbeing – of pupils, parents and staff - and the practical aspects of school management, although some key concerns remain around the 'digital divide' and vulnerable pupils.

The move to distance teaching in such a short period and the need to learn from the process was evident. A significant number of respondents spoke about inviting feedback on their distance teaching. This is commendable, especially when all the responsibilities leaders in primary schools have responsibility for are considered.

Leaders appear to need to put a lot of time into trying to support SEN and other vulnerable pupils (and their parents) during this time.

Wellbeing

- Key concerns of pupils are around missing their friends, falling behind and sixth class pupils not being able to say goodbye and prepare for post-primary. Some leaders said their pupils hadn't voiced concerns.

- Parental concerns centre around their children's anxiety, access to technology, academic progress – particularly in Maths and Gaeilge - and their own ability to support learning.

- Leaders' concerns are primarily about pupils transitioning into and out of school, pupils with SEN and other vulnerable pupils, and their families. There are also concerns about tools for distance learning, particularly their safety and the need for technical support.

- The stress of the past few months has taken a considerable toll on school leaders. While many have managed to maintain moderate levels of wellbeing, not a single one is thriving psychologically, although the percentage of principals and deputy principals who are 'languishing' is, at 0.3%, 10 times lower than the general population.

- Of particular concern are teaching principals, who reported lower levels of wellbeing across all dimensions (emotional, social, psychological) than administrative colleagues. They are trying to do all the admin with none of the admin days, on top of their teaching responsibilities.

- To lead a move to distance learning while not being in school is a mammoth task and the stress of doing so is evident in leaders' responses in the comment section on wellbeing. Disparities were highlighted between primary and post-primary schools in relation to blended learning and the integration of technology in education.

- Leaders scored highest in emotional wellbeing - despite findings themselves in a challenging situation, such as managing schools, leading pupils and teachers from a distance, school leaders are able to manage their emotions well.

- Psychological wellbeing was the second highest among leaders. The highest level of psychological wellbeing is reported in having trusting relations with others and the lowest is 'environmental mastery' - self-assessment of being good at managing the responsibilities of their daily lives. At above 4 out of a maximum of 5, it is still relatively high.

- The lowest wellbeing 'score' was social wellbeing, which is understandable given the social isolation we are all experiencing.

- A significant stressor is the uncertainty around the reopening of schools in September and the need for urgent advice from the DES.

- 76% of school leaders have taken specific actions to support their wellbeing during the lockdown, including regular exercise, mindfulness, or a new hobby, regular contact with others - friends, family, other leaders in their area - and attending webinars where they can virtually 'meet' people. Of those who didn't, most cited time constraints as a key factor. No significant differences were found between teaching and administrative leaders. The main themes from the data:
    - the power of exercise
    - the need for 'virtual' contact to enhance wellbeing
    - the need for routine
    - taking up new hobbies

- stress and its impact on wellbeing, thus the need for strategies to manage stress and focus on wellbeing
- In free form comments, the following were the key themes in relation to wellbeing:

  - Leading, learning and enjoying a different pace of life
  - The stressors that emerge when leading from afar
  - Dealing with pressure from parents
  - Welcome focus on leader wellbeing (from the survey)
  - The lack of clear guidance is impacting wellbeing

Communications

- 75% of leaders have made arrangements to contact students daily or every other day, compared to 35% in late March. This increase is closely linked to the comments on increased workload.

- 44% had managed to contact all parents within the previous two weeks. A further 33% had contacted most parents; 16% contacted some; 7% contacted a few; 2 leaders (0.2%) had contacted no parents in that time.

- The reasons for contacting parents were as follows:

  - Pace and flow of work - 80%
  - Pupil wellbeing - 77%
  - Distribution of books - 25%
  - Distribution of school meals - 15%
  - Other - 26% (comments included school work and technological issues, to support parental and family wellbeing, administrative issues, to ensure two way communication and feedback on the work, to support parents with SEN pupils)
- Email continues to be the primary medium of contact, more schools are now using it to keep in touch with their pupils and their parents. The platforms used are as follows, confirming that schools are using a variety of methods to communicate and facilitate learning:

  - Email 82%
  - Aladdin 42%
  - Hard Copy 34%
  - Class DoJo 20%
  - Googleclass 16%
  - PowerPoint 15%
  - GSuite 13%
  - Microsoft Classroom 3%
  - Other 58%
- The online resources used by schools have not changed significantly in the last two months. The primary resources continue to be the textbook publisher websites, Twinkl, and the PDST website. The only resource showing a significant difference between March and May are publisher websites, which has increased by 20%.

  - Textbook publisher websites 87%
  - PDST 63%
  - Twinkl 83%
  - IPPN website and resources 38%
  - NCSE 40%
  - Online patron resource bank 10%

- A majority of schools seem to have mastered the move to distance teaching quite well. It appears that this move was primarily due to internal expertise, leadership and commitment rather than because of external support.

Supports

- The key guidance leaders seek is around end-of-year reports and the safe reopening of schools in September, in particular the logistics around it

- Leaders need a break during the summer, do not want to receive guidelines on Friday evenings, or to hear information from the media before the DES

- Further support to help pupils in ASD classes and pupils with SEN. This was also a key concern in the March survey, so it's clear more needs to be done to help leaders with this.

- Of the free-form responses, the following are the key themes:
  - Guidance from the DES - that is focused and timely
  - Guidance for key transitions
    - Planning for reopening in September
    - Impact of lack of guidance on wellbeing
  - Guidance on distance learning
    - Digital divide
    - Online security
    - Supporting teachers with digital learning
  - SEN in the COVID crisis
  - Leadership issues and wellbeing
    - Complex role of the leader
    - How being a teaching principal impacts on wellbeing
    - Leadership and personal wellbeing
  - Supports that have worked in enhancing wellbeing since school closures.

Policy Implications

- Leading a primary school is a complex role - clear guidance on a variety of issues is very important. The number of agencies leaders interact with and the sheer amount of information involved is overwhelming.

- Need for precise and timely communication from the DES - access to the school building, SEN allocation, school meals, distance teaching, GDPR and safety of teaching and learning platforms

- Teaching principals need additional supports to be put in place

- Our young people are missing out on the social aspects of learning - the social role of school in learning was highlighted

- Technology in the school and the home - access to and ability to afford key technological supports are having an impact on distance teaching for many schools and their pupils. Respondents in DEIS schools in particular find this is impacting on their pupils learning and they worry about how they will compensate for this loss of learning when schools reopen.

One particular quote captures what school leaders are experiencing '*[It's] like trying to do a cryptic crossword without the clues at times!!*'

We sincerely thank the 1,000 school leaders who participated in this research and the almost 3,000 who participated in the initial research in late March. The research data provides evidence to present to the DES and stakeholders of the need for clear guidance and additional supports, and it also informs IPPN's own response and plans to support members in the coming weeks and months.