

Message from Damian White, IPPN President

'Physician, heal thyself' might be the sentiment that would occur to my school colleagues on hearing that I was advocating the dropping of tools every day to take a proper 'sos beag' for 10 minutes. It is, however, one of the things I plan to do when I return to school in September following my two years as IPPN President.

Eating your lunch in front of your computer is not a good idea. Neither is standing with a sandwich or a roll in one hand and a hot beverage in the other. There are occasions when circumstances will deliver little option, but for the most part, a short break is a basic entitlement and we need to look after ourselves. Those 10 minutes would be best spent sitting with colleagues discussing anything but work matters. You and your work will benefit as a result. This is supported by the Maynooth University summarised below.

Having the time to chat to your colleagues gives you a clearer insight into how they are and will help you as school leader to make more informed decisions which may affect them. Those few minutes each day help to create a bond between colleagues and encourages collegiality. It also allows the school leader headspace to get away from their work and perhaps come back to what they were working on with a different perspective. Looking back over a long career as a school leader, both teaching and administrative, I cannot recall a single benefit ever accruing to the school or myself for having worked through morning break and lunch. I appreciate that the day a school leader is on yard duty presents an exception to this, but 10 minutes needs to be grabbed unapologetically from somewhere. On such days, I always loved having lunch with our SNAs, caretaker or secretary. If the chairperson walks in at that time, bring them down for a cuppa instead of postponing your own.

In short, we get one life and one chance to live it. By looking after the small things, like taking proper breaks, both ourselves and our work will benefit. 'Listen to the Science' as Greta Thunberg might say. 'Listen to your body' is what my doctor told me. 'Doctor's orders' is what I am telling myself.

Wellbeing in Post-Covid Schools: Primary school leaders' Reimagining of the Future

In a previous e-scéal, an overview of this research by Dr Jolanta Burke and Dr Majella Dempsey and a chapter summary on Leaders' Pressures was provided. This week, an aspect covered in Chapter 3, the taking of breaks, which has been highlighted by the researchers as a significant factor in the wellbeing of school leaders is included.

Chapter 3, Section 4 – Breaks

Breaks are self-selected supports that leaders take in order to recover from their job demands. In the previous section of the report, leaders mentioned how they cannot find the time to take a break, which may have negative consequences on their wellbeing. Stress is detrimental to health only when it is relentless and no breaks are taken to replenish resources. There are two types of breaks, on-the-job breaks (e.g. sos beag, lunch), which occur during a working day; and off-the-job breaks (e.g. weekend, school holidays), which take place outside of the

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working day. The main objective of both types of break is to provide cognitive, emotional and physical recovery. Sos-beag are short, informal breaks, lasting less than 10 minutes and including either relaxation, socialisation and cognitive rest, or a brief nutrition intake (e.g. snacks and drinks). They are usually taken as a reward for the job well-done, which may explain why employees who are overwhelmed with never-ending tasks may be less likely to take it.

The benefits of micro-breaks are vast and include replenishing mental resources, an increased energy and vitality for at least an hour after the break, decline in fatigue, and more active engagement with work. **Most importantly, however, taking regular sos beag is associated with more effective coping with work-demands, faster off-job recovery, and the end-of-day enhancement of wellbeing, which ultimately results in better work-life balance. This is why it is crucial for primary school leaders to engage regularly in sos beag.**

There is little clarity about the best time during the day for taking sos beag. More research is required to identify the beneficial effects of micro-breaks at different times during the day, especially in relation to the school leader's role, as this is the first study to assess this.

A 'restoration' effect is noted among those who take their lunch breaks. Specifically, activities that are most effective in helping employees recover from work are those that promote their relaxation, social interaction and a sense of control over their environment. To be effective, the lunch activities must match employees' needs, in that one day a leader may wish to have a lunch with a colleague, the next day, they prefer to eat solo. **Having a lunch break prevents or reduces physical, cognitive and emotional depletion in the afternoon, which is related to the job demands. Therefore, in order to cope with the highly demanding school leadership role, it is crucial that leaders take their on-the-job-breaks.**

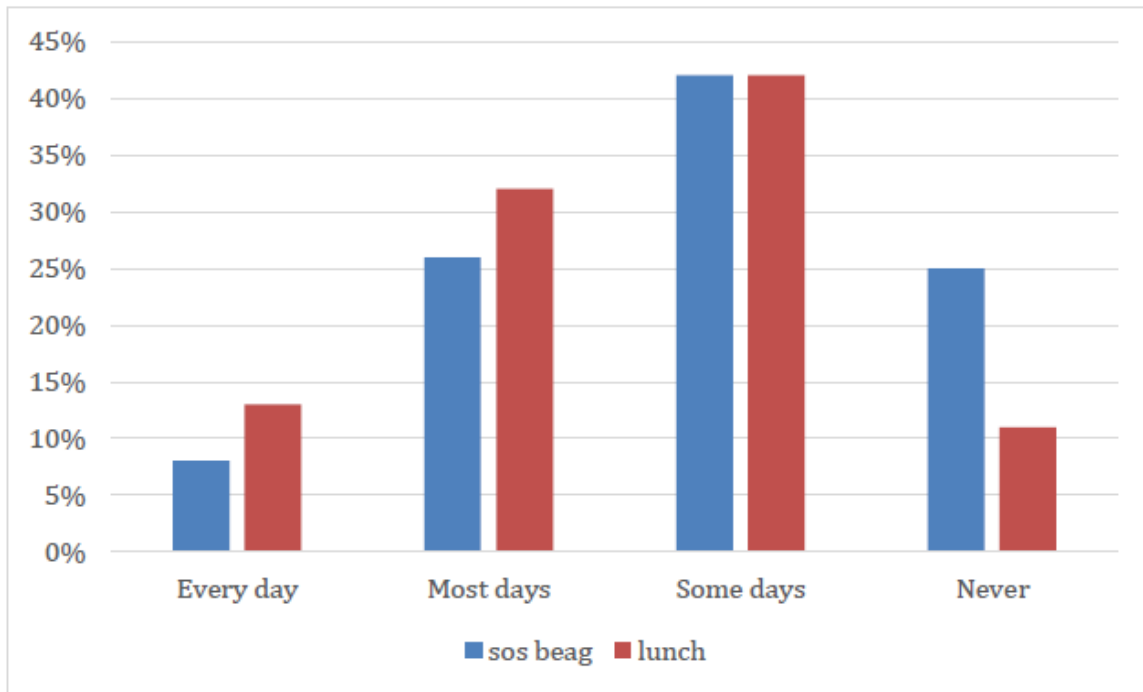
Similarly, taking time out over the weekend or during holidays moderates the negative impact of work-related stress and is important for maintaining wellbeing over time. Taking time out during the weekend to recover from job demands is associated with much higher level of engagement and lower likelihood of work-related burnout the following week. Therefore, **adequate respite is required for school leaders not only during the day, but also over the weekend and school holidays.** The current study examined all types of breaks and the role they play in supporting leaders' wellbeing.

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On-the-job Breaks

The majority of participants in the current study do not take their 'sos beag' regularly. A total of 25% reported they had never taken a 'sos beag' during the day, 42% take it some days. Only 33% take it every day or most days. Similarly, the majority of participants do not take their lunch regularly. 11% reported they had never taken their lunch, 42% take it some days, 34% take it most days and only 13% take it daily.

Figure 17. The percentage of participants taking on-the-job breaks.

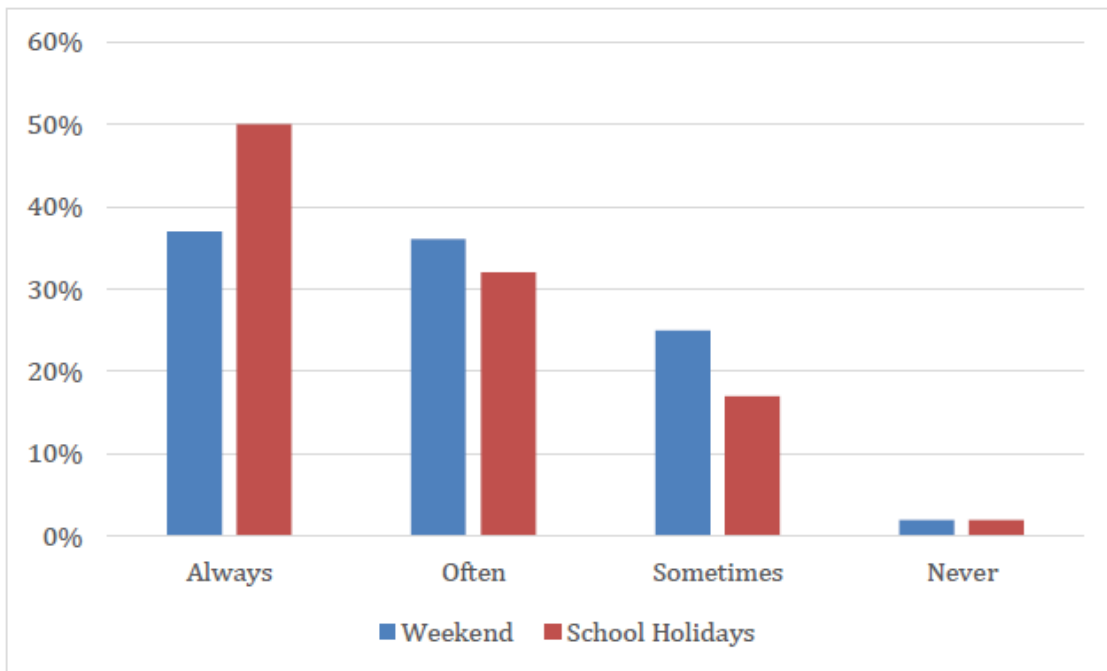


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Off-the-job Breaks

The vast majority of participants took time out during the weekend (73%). However, a quarter took a weekend off only sometimes, whereas 2% never took a weekend off. Similarly, the majority of participants (81%) took the time out during the school closure (e.g. midterm break, Christmas break), 17% took the time off sometimes, whereas a small cohort of leaders (2%) did not take the time off during the school closure.

Figure 18. The percentage of leaders taking their off-the-job breaks.



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Chapter 3 Summary

In this chapter, we reviewed leaders' supports, ways in which they utilise them and gathered suggestions from participants on how to improve their supports. Overall, participants find external agencies very useful, they acknowledge a challenge they have with the number of agencies they need to deal with and request that DE streamlines the agencies' engagement. They requested more clarity and less paperwork in their dealings with the agencies. Many participants found professional development, especially Misneach and CSL coaching, very useful. Some leaders did not engage with professional development due to the time restraints. While it is helpful for leaders to take a break to restore their resources, 7 out of 10 leaders do not take regular on-the-job breaks, and a quarter work sometimes over their weekends and school holidays. Going forward, changes are required in the supports that are offered to leaders, so that they can carve more time in their daily work to improve their community's wellbeing post-Covid.

Research references removed for brevity.

Access the Report

The full report is available here: <http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/14412/>