



Administration Days for Teaching Principals

IPPN Position Paper

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1 BACKGROUND

IPPN is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. It is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education as an official Education Partner, IPPN works with the DES, the National Parents' Council, management bodies, unions, education agencies, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,600 Principals and Deputy Principals.

2 CONTEXT

As a body supporting principals in their professional and personal development and as a recognised Education Partner, IPPN believes that it has an obligation to highlight the increasing challenges faced by Teaching Principals and to make recommendations that will address some of those challenges, so that Teaching Principals may be enabled to focus on their core function – being leaders of teaching and learning.

This paper addresses the topic of administration time for Teaching Principals, with particular reference to the impact of workload on their ability to effectively lead and manage the teaching and learning in their schools and the impact of workload on their health and well-being.

Overload for school principals is not a new issue. At the very first Principals' Conference in Cork in 1994, six years before IPPN was founded, concern was expressed about the excessive workload being handled by school leaders. It has been a priority topic for discussion at every Principal's Conference since. Meanwhile, workload issues continue to escalate with each passing year.

Six years after that first conference, the Department of Education and Science (DES) introduced the concept of administration days to allow Teaching Principals to 'undertake administrative, leadership and management functions' (PC13/2000). Two years later, the DES issued PC25/2002, increasing the number of administration days for Teaching Principals to a maximum of 22 days. At the IPPN Conference in 2005, then Minister for Education and Science Mary Hanafin promised to look at the workload of the school principal. Despite that promise made ten years ago, a thirteen year old circular still dictates that Teaching Principals should spend a maximum of 12% of their school year on their leadership role.

In numerous consultation surveys subsequently, IPPN has consistently heard from Teaching Principals that one non-teaching day per week would have the most significant impact on reducing work overload. At Conference 2015, IPPN was asked by Minister for Education and Skills Jan O'Sullivan to prioritise areas for increased spending in future education budgets. When surveyed by IPPN, the top priority for all principals, both administrative and teaching, was one administration day per week for Teaching Principals. It is against this background and in this context that IPPN presents this paper.

3 THE ISSUE

The two main statutory provisions that underpin the role of the school principal are Circular 16/73 and the Education Act (1998). The Hay Group's Report 'Defining the Role of the Primary Principal in Ireland' (2002) noted a difference in emphasis between the 1973 and 1998 provisions, with 'the former stressing management and supervisory aspects of the role and the latter emphasising the learning, developmental, consultative and leadership aspects of the role' (Fullan, 2006). Unfortunately, instead of improving the situation, the change of emphasis has resulted in an expansion of, rather than a revision of the principal's duties.

In the Irish primary school system, 60% of principals are Teaching Principals. Teaching Principals have two roles to fulfil. They have full-time duties as teachers, more often than not teaching in multi-grade settings. They also have full-time roles as school principals. In other words, they are doing two jobs for the price of one. In fact, it could reasonably be argued that many Teaching Principals are doing three jobs because they have only part-time administrative support. 'Guilty', 'stressed', 'exhausted', 'suffocated' and 'overloaded' are words that Teaching Principals use regularly to describe how they feel on a daily basis. Is it any wonder that in IPPN's 'Review of Principals' Workload' most Teaching Principals felt that 'the dual role is impossible and there is simply no time left in the week, having responded to all the urgent tasks that come their way to spend time on evaluation, planning or on any other task on the medium to long term horizon'? It should be noted that this review was carried out eleven years ago, long before SSE, SIPs, POD, OLCS and many other initiatives were introduced.

It is clear from what Teaching Principals tell us that lack of time to deal effectively with their workload is having a negative effect on their ability to focus on leading teaching and learning. This should be a serious concern for the DES because of the inevitable consequences for schools. A 2014 study of management practices in schools in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Germany, Sweden, Brazil, Italy and India by researchers at the London School of Economics concludes that it is leadership that makes schools successful. If we need further convincing, Michael Fullan's 'Quality Leadership ⇔ Quality Learning: Proof beyond reasonable doubt' (2006) makes a powerful argument. If we expect our school leaders to function effectively as leaders, then we must support them with sufficient time to do so. If we expect our school leaders to be lifelong learners and agents of change then we must not actively prevent them from attending the main Continuous Professional Development event of the year by refusing to provide substitute cover for them to attend.

At IPPN's Conference in January 2015, Dr. Philip Riley presented us with stark evidence that Teaching Principals die younger. Do we need a more convincing argument that the health and well-being of 60% of the school leaders in our country is at serious risk?

A recent document, 'Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion – Well-being in Primary Schools', published jointly by the DES and the Department of Health, suggests that 'within the school context, positive mental health promotion should focus on enhancing protective factors and minimizing risks.' No school principal would argue that the mental health of children is not vitally important. Isn't it ironic that school leaders are being asked to implement strategies to protect and minimize risks for the children in their care while the very act of doing so will increase their workload and impact further on their own health and well-being?

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

IPPN recommends that the DES rescind PC25/02. In its place, a new circular recognising the emphasis in the Education Act (1998) on the learning, developmental, consultative and leadership aspects of the role of the principal should be published. This circular should provide:

- a) a minimum of one administration day per week for all Teaching Principals, to be taken at their own discretion
- b) provide for the establishment of a national panel of qualified substitute teachers allocated to clusters of schools - to ensure adequate and consistent cover for Teaching Principals' administration days
- c) provide for adequate administrative support for Teaching Principals.

5 CONCLUSIONS

'In 21st century education, it is critically important that principals can focus on doing the right thing – leading and managing the quality of learning in their school. An overloaded principal runs the risk of losing that focus.'

Who could argue with former Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn T.D. in his foreword to 'Priorities for Principal Teachers – In Clear Focus' (2014)? However, while Minister Quinn was expressing concern about principals leading 21st century education, the role of principal is still being defined to a large extent by a circular written on a typewriter in 1973 and the time allocated to Teaching Principals to fulfil their leadership role in 21st century Ireland is governed by a thirteen year old circular which stipulates that a maximum of 12% of their time may be spent on their leadership duties.

There is evidence that the quality of leadership in schools impacts directly on the quality of learning of pupils. There is evidence that lack of time and inadequate administrative supports to deal effectively with workload are barriers that prevent Teaching Principals from spending 'quality time' on their leadership function and there is evidence that this is having a particularly negative effect on the health of 60% of primary school leaders.

It is IPPN's belief that this situation is no longer sustainable.

'There is proof beyond reasonable doubt that quality leadership and quality learning go hand in hand. It is time to strengthen this powerful bond through action'. (Fullan, 2006)