



National Principals' Forum

2025 Principal Workload Survey Report

Lighten the Load – National Principals' Forum

1. Executive Summary

Despite repeated assurances from educational stakeholders, the role of the primary school principal in Ireland has become increasingly unsustainable. In June 2025, nearly 400 principals responded to the National Principals' Forum (NPF) workload survey. Their responses provide a stark and unified message: the burden continues to grow, support remains elusive, and systemic reform has not materialised.

Key findings include:

- 94% of principals say workload is a challenge; 63% describe it as *unsustainable*.
- 83% report that their mental health has suffered due to the job.
- 79% say their physical health has suffered.
- 66% have considered stepping down; 22% of schools report a principal has stepped down in the past five years.
- 94% say the role is not clearly defined.
- 85% report that their Board of Management does not lighten their workload.

Special education classes are a consistent source of concern — often introduced without adequate facilities, training, or support. Meanwhile, initiatives aimed at reducing workload have either stalled or backfired, increasing the administrative load rather than streamlining it.

This report provides a comprehensive breakdown of the data and includes direct testimony from principals themselves.

2. Background



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In the years following the 2019 National Principals' Forum survey, there was broad recognition across the education system that the workload of primary school principals was unsustainable. Policy documents, strategic reviews, and discussion fora all acknowledged the need for reform. There was, in effect, a shared consensus that the role had become unmanageable.

Various national initiatives emerged promising to reduce the burden. Advisory groups were established. Planning requirements were reviewed. Administrative thresholds were adjusted.

Yet six years on, the experience on the ground tells a different story.

While these initiatives may have been well-intentioned, principals report little if any reduction in the pressures they face. In some cases, complexity has increased, particularly around finance, building projects, and the rollout of special education classes. Administrative tasks have become more digitised, but not less time-consuming. Circulars have encouraged simplification, but compliance remains as demanding as ever.

On 19th of June 2024, a cross party meeting was held in Leinster House by principal representatives from every county, where principals outlined the dire financial situation schools are in and yet a year on the situation is worsening.

The findings in this report highlight a critical gap between what was promised and what principals experience each day. It is not that nothing has been done, but that what has been done has not worked.

3. Stress & Workload

If the purpose of school leadership is to shape teaching and learning, foster a strong school culture, and support the wellbeing of pupils and staff, then the current model of principalship in Irish primary education is fundamentally broken.

In the 2025 survey:

- **94%** of principals described their workload as a challenge
- **63%** of all respondents described it as “unsustainable”
- Only **5%** found their workload “manageable”

The unrelenting pressure is felt by those in large schools and small, in urban and rural settings, by those with years of experience and those still finding their feet. The data shows no



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meaningful difference based on length of service. If anything, the longer a principal remains in the role, the more they report being worn down by it.

“I consider myself to be hard-working and resilient — but I cannot sustain the current workload and pressures of my position.”

The idea that the role becomes easier over time — through wisdom, systems, or support — is not borne out by this survey. Nor is there evidence that support structures, policy changes, or strategic interventions have delivered the relief long promised.

Teaching Principals

Among teaching principals — who make up more than half of all primary leaders — the findings are even more alarming. The vast majority of teaching principals described their workload as unsustainable, with many expressing despair at being expected to teach full-time while also running a school.

“Teaching four classes and being expected to also be the Principal of a school is simply unsustainable. It’s an outdated concept.”

The strain is systemic. The role that has expanded far beyond its original remit — without the infrastructure to support it.

4. Health Impact

The human cost of the principalship is severe.

In this survey:

- **83%** of principals said their **mental health has suffered** as a direct result of their job.
- **79%** reported a **negative impact on their physical health**.

These are not anecdotal impressions or background complaints. They are clear statements from school leaders acknowledging the personal toll the job takes — emotionally, physically, and, by extension, professionally.

“Two principals close to me have stepped down. After 18 years as a principal, I am going on leave next year. My health and family cannot afford for me to stay on.”

These findings are not new. In 2019, the NPF survey reported similar rates of mental and physical health issues. Six years later, nothing has improved.



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Indeed, in multiple open-text responses, principals reported experiencing symptoms consistent with burnout — insomnia, anxiety, stress-related illness, and exhaustion.

“I regularly wake at 3am worrying about work. The job has consumed my life.”

There is also a dangerous normalisation at play. Many principals described these impacts not with outrage, but resignation, as if it were part of the job description to become unwell.

“It just comes with the role. We’re supposed to accept it.”

Such sentiments suggest that current efforts to promote principal wellbeing — through policy documents, circulars, or pilot initiatives — have not reached the people they are designed to serve. Wellbeing cannot be improved by statements of intent. It requires a fundamental redesign of the role, with time, support, and authority to delegate meaningfully.

Not only does poor health undermine the ability to lead a school — it also drives people out of the profession altogether.

5. Sustainability & Retention

The 2025 survey data is consistent with all the other studies - the principalship is not a sustainable role.

- 66% of principals say they have considered stepping down from their role.
- In 22% of schools, a principal has stepped down in the past five years.
- The reasons cited include stress, ill health, and unmanageable workload.

The attrition rate among principals is rising, and the appetite among aspiring leaders is falling.

“I will be stepping down unless something changes. I’m done sacrificing my health, my evenings, my family time for a job that doesn’t have boundaries.”

“The role is designed to break you down slowly.”

This sentiment is consistent across all experience levels. Principals with five years of experience are as likely to report considering resignation as those with 20.

And the consequences are stark:



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- Schools are being left without experienced leaders.
- Boards of Management are struggling to recruit.
- Deputy principals are increasingly unwilling to step forward.
- Acting appointments are becoming the norm.

One might expect that, by now, structured responses would be in place to reverse this trend. Instead, the prevailing feeling among principals is that they are being left to carry on — and carry everything.

“Either the Department introduces release valves in the near future, or I step away.”

The findings of the survey, again, reaffirm the NPF’s call to the government and stakeholders to affect the major changes needed to sustain the work of school leaders. It is clear that little to no progress is being made to retain our school leaders.

6. Special Classes – Mandated but Unsupported

In recent years, the Department of Education has moved to rapidly expand the number of special education classes in primary schools — especially ASD classes. The intention behind this policy is clear and welcome: to ensure inclusion and meet the needs of all pupils.

But what this survey makes painfully evident is that principals are being asked to deliver this expansion without the tools, space, training, or support to do it properly.

From the 2025 survey:

- Only 16.7% of those felt sufficiently trained to lead and manage it.
- Just 7.5% felt supported by the Department of Education.
- Only 43.7% were satisfied with the accommodation provided.

These numbers alone are damning. But the real story is in the comments from principals:

“We are facing into year two of an ASD class with three SNAs... working in a tiny 20m² area, no toilets, no running water, no sensory room. Not good enough.”



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“The Department assured me that a modular building would be in place... we are now in mid-June and planning permission hasn't even been applied for.”

“There is a severe lack of support for children and the staff who teach them. Schools are not supported sufficiently by the Building Department or the DES.”

Many principals described the physical conditions of their ASD classes as “unacceptable,” “unsafe,” or “disrespectful.” Some reported teaching in sheds, offices, or reconfigured hallways. Others noted that modular buildings were promised but never delivered, leaving SNAs and pupils with high needs in cramped, unsuitable spaces.

“Accommodation is not satisfactory — after many years of fighting. The stress was on the principal alone.”

The burden is not only infrastructural. Many principals said they were not trained in how to lead ASD classes, manage complex needs, or support staff working in high-stress environments.

“It took a long time, but we got there with training.” (One of the few positive comments.)

What emerges from this section is not just dissatisfaction, it is a sense of betrayal. Schools were often promised adequate provision for special classes, along with training and supports, and the Department of Education walked away, essentially leaving it up to the school to figure it out.

The responsibility to “make it work” falls squarely on the principal who must source equipment, chase planning approvals, support SNAs, and often deal with crisis management around behavioural incidents.

This is inclusion in theory. In practice, it is delegation without support.

7. Systemic Burdens – HR, Finance, Governance

If the daily pressures of teaching, leadership, and inclusion were not enough, principals are also expected to act as HR managers, financial controllers, procurement officers, compliance administrators, and building project managers — often simultaneously, and often alone.

The survey data makes clear that these duties are neither minor nor manageable:

- 74% of principals said release time was a challenge or unsustainable.
- 79% found HR management to be a challenge or worse.



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- 89% said the same about finance.
- 83% reported that lack of consultation from stakeholders was a serious concern.
- 94% said the role is not clearly defined.
- 85% said their Board of Management does not lighten their workload.

These findings suggest that far from being instructional leaders, principals have become the underpaid CEOs of complex multi-role institutions — without the team or infrastructure such a role would ordinarily require.

“Anything to do with contractors, building works, roofs, historical building issues — it all falls on me.”

“I have no expertise in managing building projects or summer works schemes. Yet I’m expected to run them.”

“Finances. A volunteer treasurer on the BOM does their best, but in reality, there’s still a lot left for me to do.”

The “one thing you would like removed from your role” question received almost 400 responses. The most common themes included:

- Building works and maintenance
- Finance, fundraising and grant administration
- Teaching duties (in small schools)
- HR and recruitment
- Excessive paperwork and red tape

The Department of Education has been outsourcing professional responsibility to school leaders without compensating them for it — in time, in money, or in support.

“The struggle to pay bills — that should be done by the Department, not the school.”



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“We are treated like the last mile of policy. Everything flows downhill and lands on our desk.”

The model of governance in Irish primary schools relies heavily on the goodwill and free labour of volunteers — boards of management, parents’ associations, and retired teachers. But when that goodwill fades, the burden lands back on the principal.

What emerges is a picture of leadership that is more about managing systems than shaping schools. And many have had enough.

8. Policy Promises vs Reality

Over the past six years, there has been no shortage of policy statements promising to reduce principal workload.

Initiatives have been launched, fora convened, and circulars issued, all recognising that something needed to change.

And yet, the data in this report makes one conclusion unavoidable: very little has changed for the people actually doing the job.

“Workload is worse than ever. Everything that was supposed to help has only added more layers.”

At various points since 2019, official materials have promised the following:

- A clearer definition of the principal’s role
- Increased release time
- Simplified planning and paperwork
- Better coordination of school supports
- Greater inclusion in decision-making
- Streamlined finance and procurement systems

These were not unreasonable aims. They remain important aims. But for many principals, they have become unfulfilled promises or, worse, illusions of progress.

“Digital platforms were meant to reduce paperwork. They just moved it around.”



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“Every new initiative comes with a form, a deadline, a meeting. Nothing comes off the list.”

Some respondents acknowledged that efforts had been made, but said the execution had been partial, fragmented, or overly dependent on local initiative.

Others expressed frustration that those tasked with advocating for principal wellbeing were themselves constrained by bureaucracy or political caution.

“It feels like everyone agrees we’re under pressure — but no one actually steps in to relieve it.”

One of the clearest examples of this disconnect is the ongoing call to reduce administrative workload.

Circulars have repeatedly urged schools to “simplify” planning and reporting. But when compliance frameworks, inspections, and funding approvals still demand exhaustive documentation, simplification remains theoretical.

This lack of visible, practical change has serious consequences:

- It erodes trust in policy-making.
- It discourages engagement in consultation processes.
- It amplifies burnout, by reinforcing the sense that nothing improves.

Many principals are now too busy, or too exhausted, to follow new initiatives that claim to reduce their burden.

“We’re no longer waiting for help. We’re just trying to survive the year.”

9. Voices from School Leaders

The numbers in this report are bad enough but the words of principals speak louder.

Across the 2025 survey, hundreds of principals provided open responses, some brief, some heartfelt, many exhausted. Together, they form a powerful archive of experience: a shared portrait of school leadership that is committed, capable, and increasingly disillusioned.

Below are selected quotes, grouped thematically



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Mental and Physical Health

"I regularly wake at 3am worrying about work. The job has consumed my life."

"After 18 years as a principal, I'm going on leave. My health and family can't afford for me to stay on."

"You learn to live in a constant state of burnout. That's what the job demands."

Unsustainable Workload

"Teaching four classes and being expected to also be the Principal of a school is simply unsustainable. It's an outdated concept."

"I consider myself hard-working and resilient — but I can't sustain this."

"We are the last mile of every policy. Whatever it is, it lands on our desk."

Special Education Pressures

"We are facing year two of an ASD class with three SNAs... in a 20m² space. No toilets. No sensory room. Not good enough."

"The Department promised a modular building. Planning permission hasn't even been applied for."

"There's no training, no extra time, and no supports. Just expectation."

Building Works, Finance & Governance

"Anything to do with contractors, roofs, or building issues — it all falls on me."

"I have no experience with project management. But apparently I'm in charge of it now."

"A volunteer treasurer does their best. But the real pressure is on me."

Policy Fatigue

"Every policy sounds helpful on paper. But the real experience is just more meetings, more forms, more pressure."



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“Circulars arrive about reducing workload. Then the next page adds three more things.”

“It feels like no one listens. We’re shouting into a vacuum.”

The Breaking Point

“I will be stepping down unless something changes. I’m done sacrificing my health, my evenings, my family time.”

“I don’t want to leave — but I can’t do this much longer.”

“We’re not leading schools anymore. We’re managing chaos.”

These quotes are not isolated or extreme. They are representative of the general mood, with exhausted clarity.

They also reflect a simple truth: principals want to lead teaching and learning. They want to build strong communities. But they are being systematically obstructed by a system that loads them with responsibility while withholding support.

10. Recommendations & Solutions

Throughout this report, a consistent picture emerges: the role of the primary school principal has become unworkable. It is a structural issue and it requires structural solutions.

Below are a set of recommendations grounded in the lived experience of principals and supported by survey data. Each is accompanied by suggested actions, and, where possible, the voices of those calling for change.

1. End the Teaching Principal Model

“Teaching four classes while running a school? We wouldn’t ask that of anyone else.”

- **Recommendation:** Transition all schools to administrative leadership structures.
- **Action:** Introduce an accelerated timeline for lowering the administrative principal threshold.



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- **Support:** Provide interim release days for teaching principals above a minimum school size.
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2. Remove Building Works and Procurement from the Principal's Role

"I have no training in planning permissions or tendering. Why am I responsible?"

- **Recommendation:** Reassign all Summer Works, prefab procurement, and capital build oversight to dedicated regional project officers.
 - **Action:** Create a National Schools Project Unit to liaise with principals rather than delegate to them.
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3. Professionalise School Finance Management

"A volunteer treasurer does their best. But the real responsibility falls on me."

- **Recommendation:** Fund and deploy qualified financial officers across school clusters.
 - **Action:** Centralise grant allocation, school accounts, and audit procedures via a shared digital platform.
 - **Additional Benefit:** Reduces audit risk, increases compliance, and lifts workload.
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4. Guarantee Adequate Accommodation Before Approving Special Classes

"Our second ASD class is in a small office. It took three years to get that far."

- **Recommendation:** No school should be approved for a special class without clear, confirmed accommodation and sensory provision.
- **Action:** Require a minimum standard checklist before opening dates are agreed.



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5. Mandatory Training and Staffing Supports for Special Classes

“It’s inclusion on paper — but abandonment in practice.”

- **Recommendation:** Provide funded training for all principals and staff overseeing special classes.
 - **Action:** Fund NCSE Special Education Support Teams, with regular in-person visits and advisory follow-up.
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6. Reassign HR Responsibilities to Regional Supports

“Recruitment, Garda vetting, contracts — that’s not what I trained to do.”

- **Recommendation:** Assign core HR functions to regional education offices or HR co-ops.
 - **Action:** Pilot cluster-based HR administrators across rural and urban networks.
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7. Enforce Measurable Workload Reduction

“Every new policy adds weight. Nothing is ever taken away.”

- **Recommendation:** Link all new circulars or initiatives to an implementation audit of workload impact.
 - **Action:** Require a “burden analysis” for every initiative — and sunset reviews of existing policies.
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8. Restore Trust through Direct Consultation with Principals

“It feels like we’re always being spoken for — but never spoken with.”



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- **Recommendation:** All system-level reforms affecting school leadership must include direct consultation with principals currently in the role.
- **Action:** The Primary Education Forum within the Department of Education must meet regularly, set targets and be accountable for their decisions.

The findings of this survey do not call for reflection. They call for action. Primary school principals in Ireland are not looking for sympathy, slogans, or the next well-intentioned working group. They are asking for their role to be made possible. The system continues to function not because it is well-designed, but because principals are absorbing the consequences of its failures — quietly, and at great personal cost. That cannot continue. The choice now is not whether reform is needed, but whether we are willing to listen to those holding the system together — and act before more of them walk away.