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A century of service

School leaders: workload, wellbeing and curriculum change

April 2025

JOB Ref: 782425/CM

1

Methodology and Principal Findings

Research Objectives And Methodology

Why?

The research objective was to obtain information on principals and deputy principals' views on workload, wellbeing and their schools' preparedness for Senior Cycle curriculum change.

Repondents:

The survey population comprised 96 school leaders – principals and deputy principals – who constituted a representative sample across school type and size.

When?

Fieldwork was conducted in March 2025.

How?

The survey instrument was an online questionnaire sent by RED C.

Principal Findings – 1

Profile of school leaders

Approximately one-third of school leaders are five years or less in their post and a further third are between 5 and 10 years in their post.

There are slightly more females than males in school leadership posts.

School leaders' perception of their role

The majority of principals identified leading teaching and learning as the most important aspect of their role. This involves focusing on school culture to sustain high quality teaching and learning, fostering inclusion of all students, and overseeing curriculum planning and implementation.

Deputy principals also identified leading and learning as important but, in keeping with their role, also highlighted school development and management of the organisation. This involves creating an orderly and secure school learning environment, engaging with students in relation to school policies and implementation of school development activities, and building relationships with parents and the wider community.

Principal Findings – 2

School leaders' weekly activities

The range of activities undertaken by principals and deputy principals are broadly similar. The top three activities are: school administration, meetings with staff, external agencies and parents, and interactions with students.

Deputy principals are highly engaged in implementing schools' anti-bullying and school behaviour polices – 63% identified this work as among their top 3 weekly activities.

Both principals and deputy principals have a long working week with 73% of principals and 61% of deputy principals working more than 50 hours each week.

Supports for school leaders

The top three supports identified by school leaders are: having a strong sense of community in the school and among school staff, a supportive Board of Management, and parents being supportive of the work of the school.

The weakest sources of support were identified as: infrequent feedback on their work from colleagues and ineffective functioning of in-school leadership teams.

Principal Findings – 3

Workplace stress for school leaders

The top three sources of stress for school leaders are: not having enough time to lead teaching and learning, the amount of work to be done each day, and lack of time to focus on teaching and learning.

Ensuring compliance with Departmental and other regulatory requirements is a high source of stress followed by having to spend too much time on administrative activities.

School leaders experience high level of stress with the majority stating that they feel under pressure all the time, do not have time to wind down, and feel burnt out and exhausted.

Just over half of school leaders stated that they consider their general health to be good.

School preparedness for Senior Cycle curriculum change

The main resources needed to support Senior Cycle curriculum change are an increase in the number of leadership posts in schools, in particular deputy principal posts, addressing the teacher supply problem, and ensuring the availability of examination materials to subject teachers at the beginning of the school year.

Having more than one day's inservice training in the first year for teachers of the new subject specification was also identified as important.

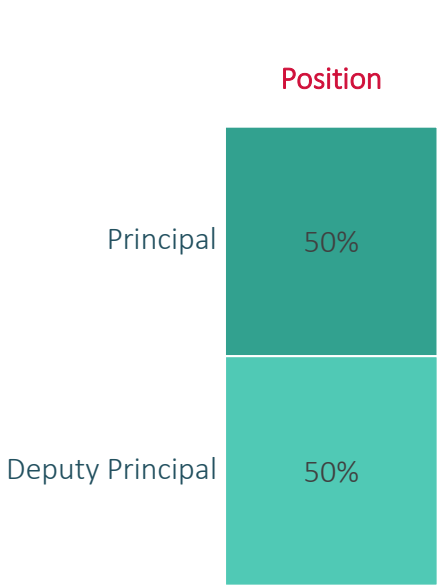
In relation to the introduction of new science specifications in September 2025, half of all school leaders indicated that their schools do not have a sufficient number of science laboratories, 47% of schools have teacher supply problems for science subjects, and 44% believe their science labs are not well equipped.

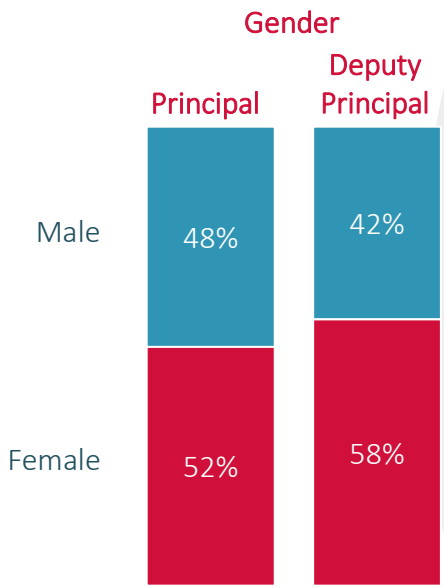
Teacher supply for science subjects was identified as problematic in many schools as was the number of science laboratories.

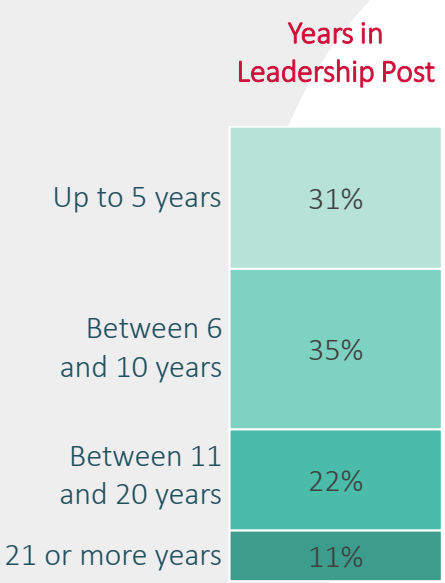
2

Profile of School Leaders

Profile Of Respondents

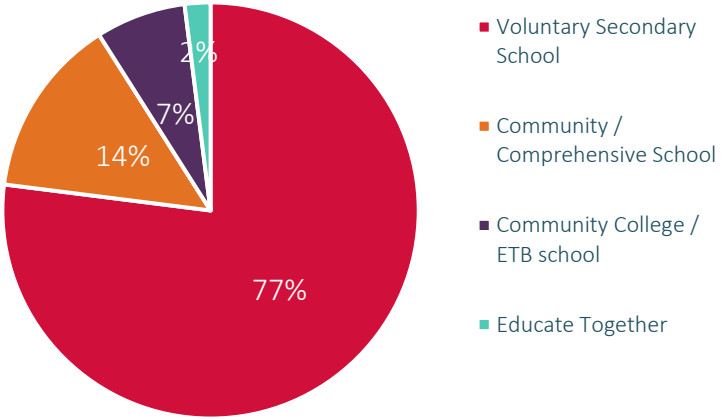




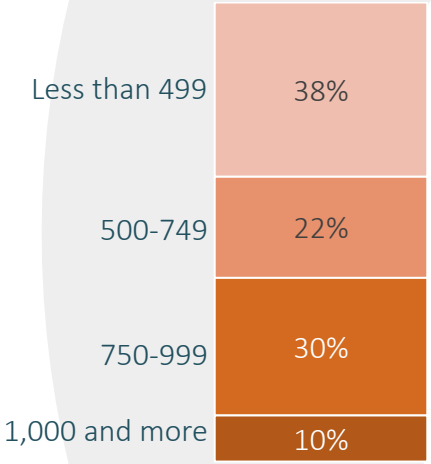


Type And Size Of School

Type of School



Size of School

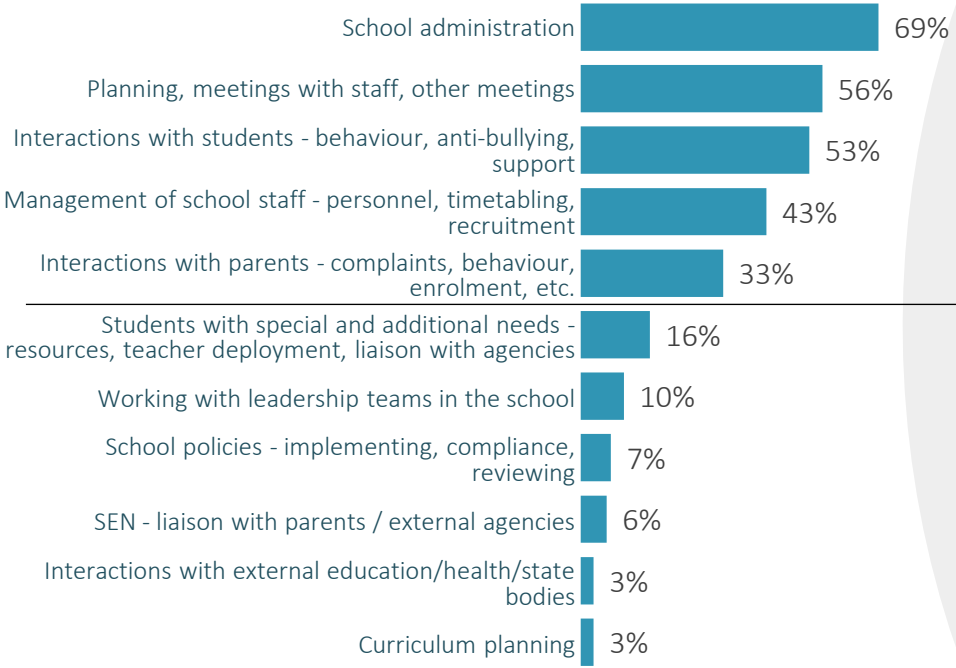


Q. What type of school do you teach in?
Q. What is the approximate number of students in your school?
(Base: All School Leaders; n=96)

3

Leadership Activities

Activities In A Typical Working Week

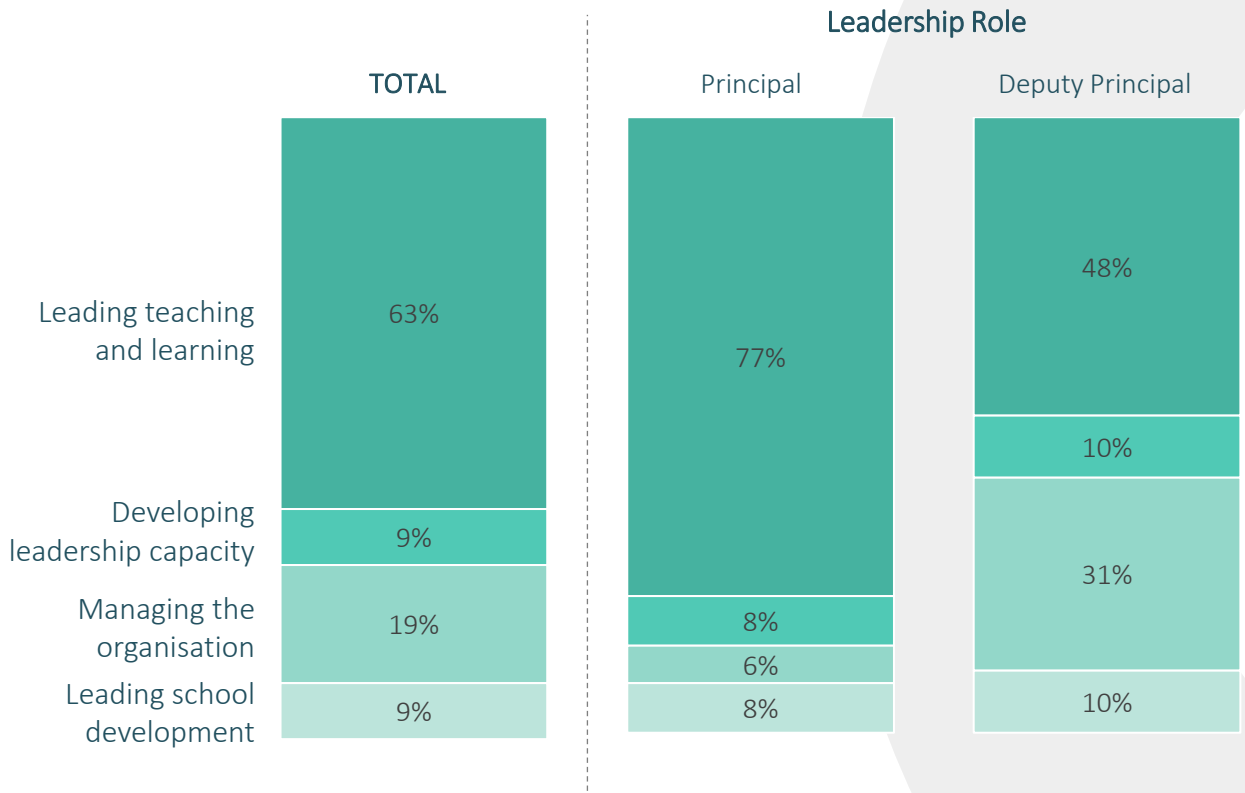


	Principal	Deputy Principal
School administration	69%	69%
Planning, meetings with staff, other meetings	65%	48%
Interactions with students - behaviour, anti-bullying, support	44%	63%
Management of school staff - personnel, timetabling, recruitment	44%	42%
Interactions with parents - complaints, behaviour, enrolment, etc.	29%	38%
Students with special and additional needs - resources, teacher deployment, liaison with agencies	15%	17%
Working with leadership teams in the school	8%	13%
School policies - implementing, compliance, reviewing	8%	6%
SEN - liaison with parents / external agencies	6%	6%
Interactions with external education/health/state bodies	6%	0
Curriculum planning	6%	0

Q. Please rank the below activities from 1 to 11, where 1 is given to the activity you spend most time on and 11 is the activity you spend least time on in a typical working week

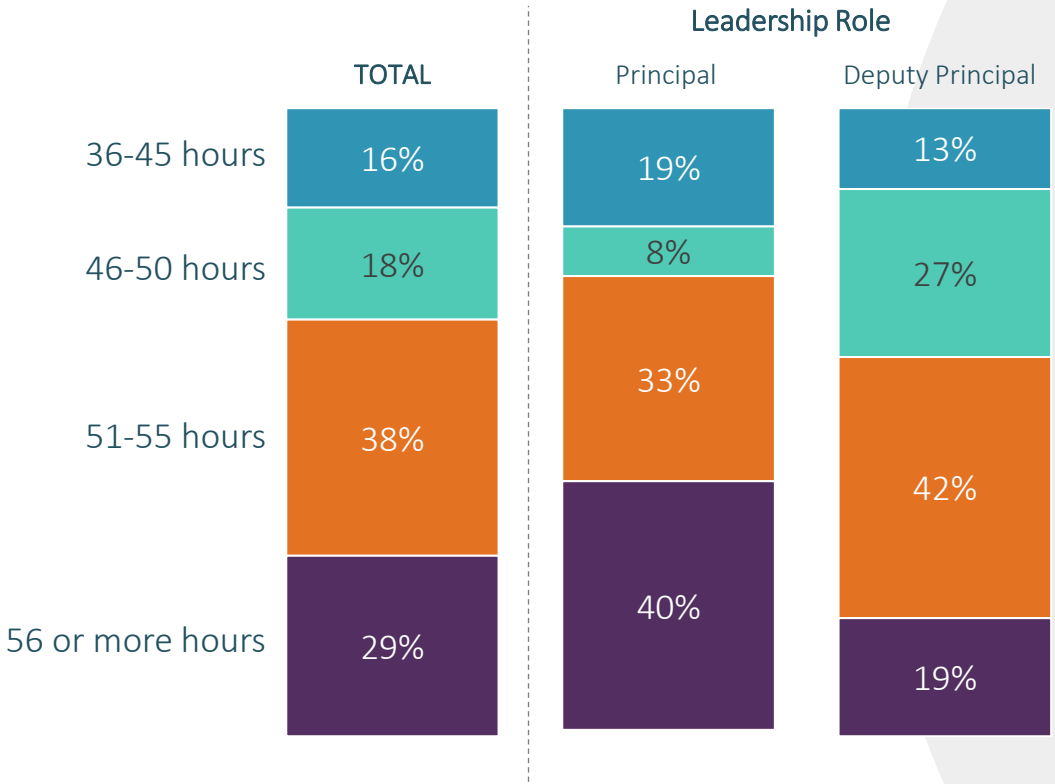
(Base: All School Leaders; n=96)

Most Important Areas In School Leadership



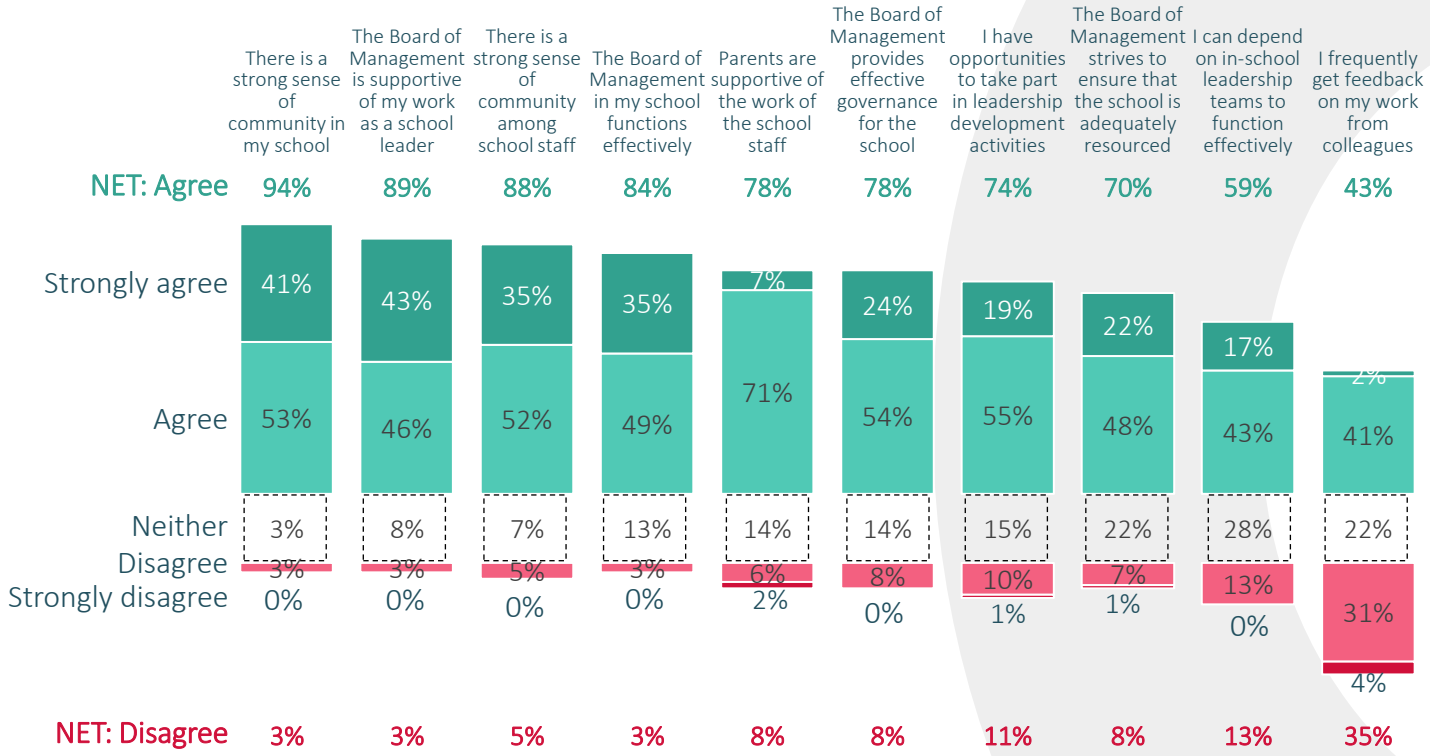
Q. Which area of work do you consider to be most important in school leadership?
(Base: All School Leaders; n=96)

Hours Worked Each Week



Q. Thinking of all your leadership responsibilities, approximately how much time do you spend working each week
(Base: All School Leaders; n=96)

Resources To Support Leadership Role



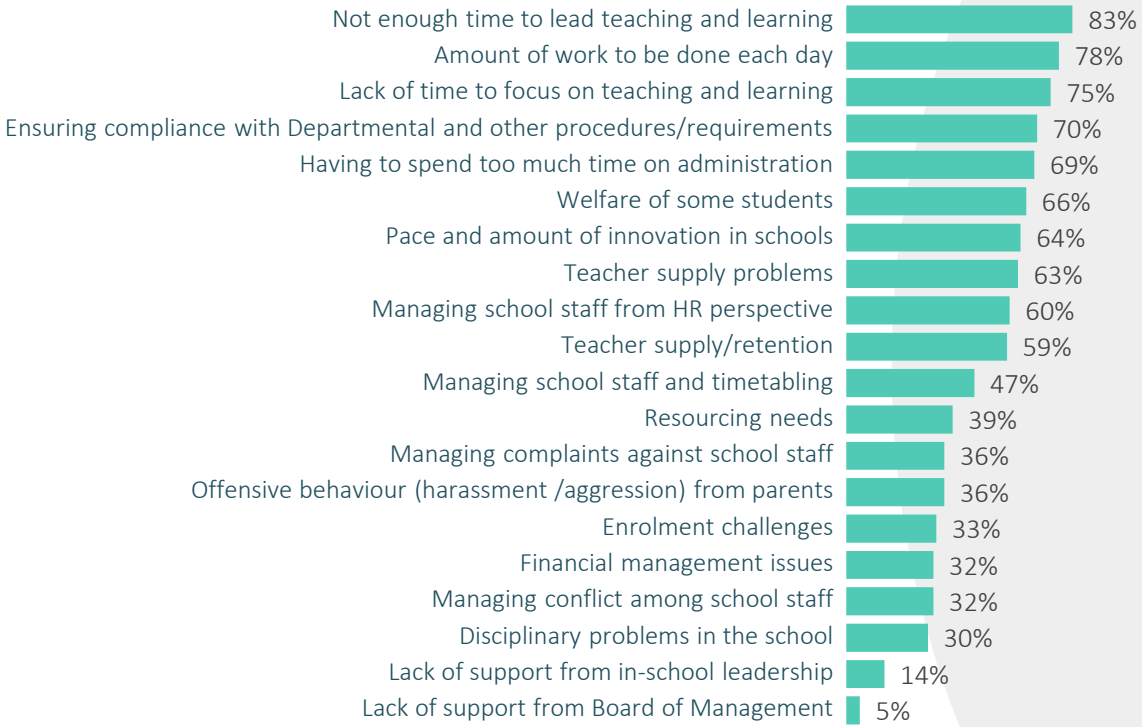
Q. Resources to support you in your leadership role: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

(Base: All School Leaders; n=96)

4

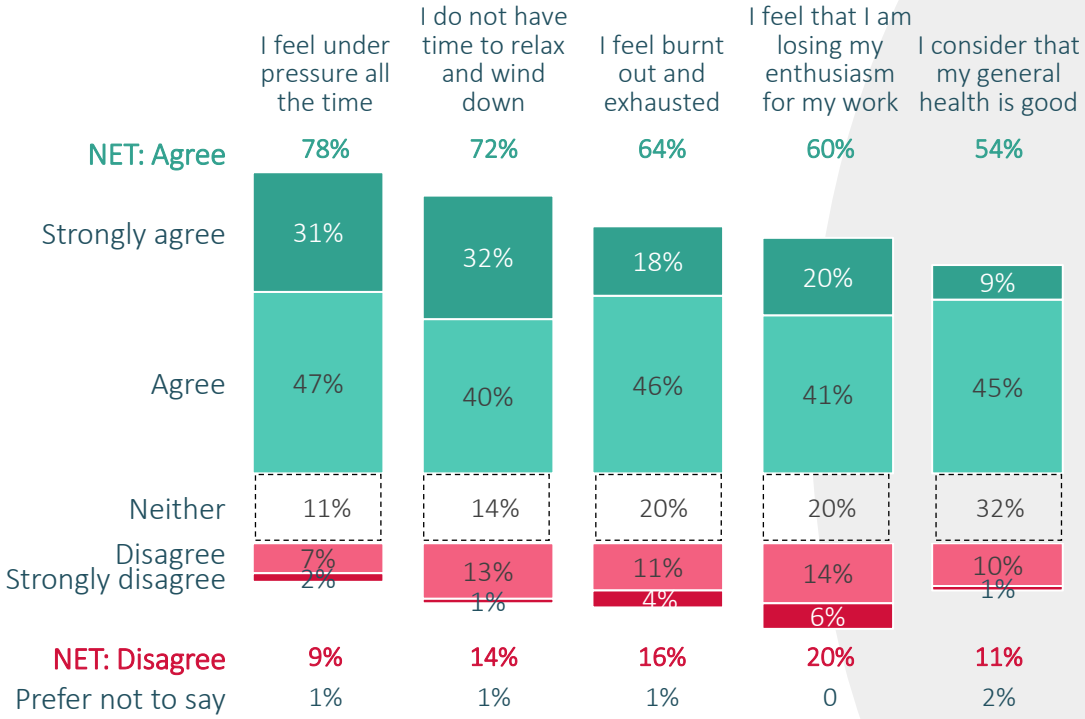
Sources of Stress

Sources Of Stress In Your Work



Q. Which of the following, if any, are sources of stress in your work. Please select all that apply.
(Base: All School Leaders; n=96)

Health And Wellbeing



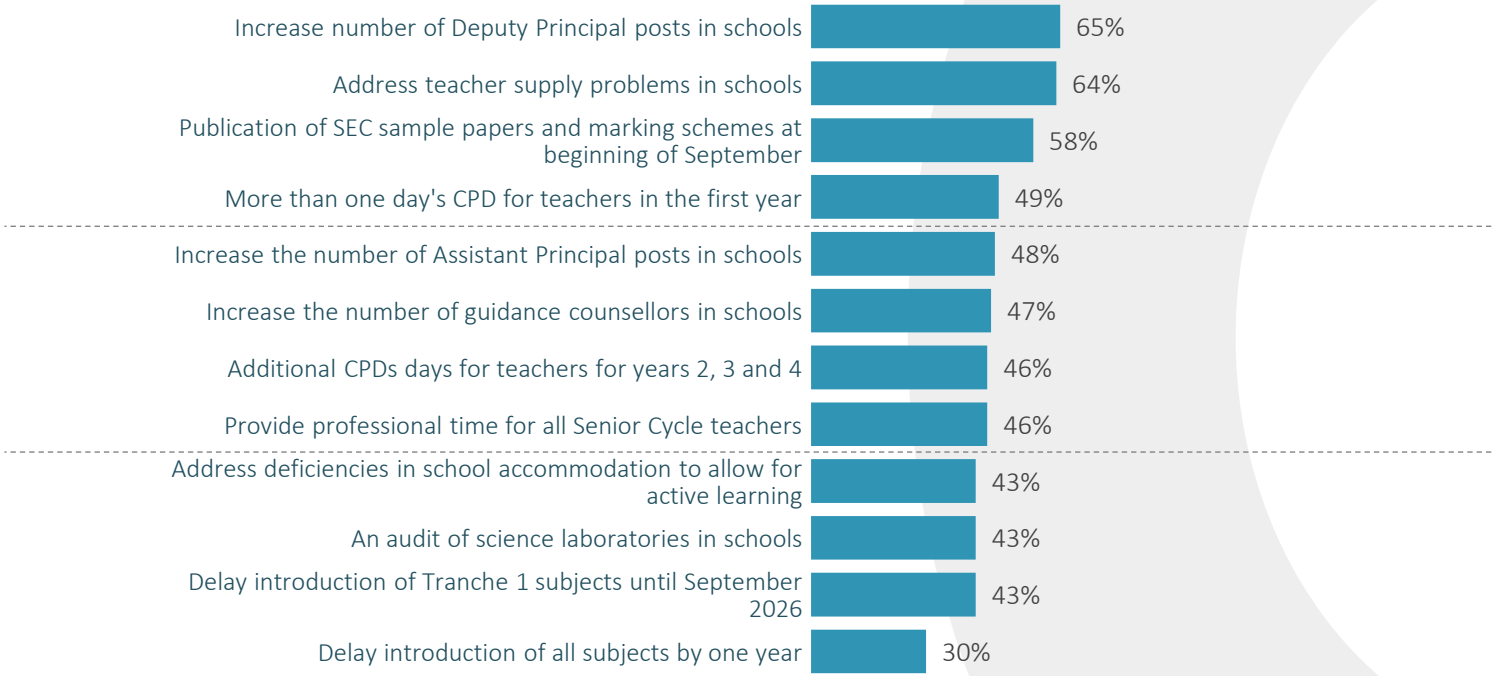
Q. How do you rate your health and wellbeing over recent working weeks: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements

(Base: All School Leaders; n=96)

5

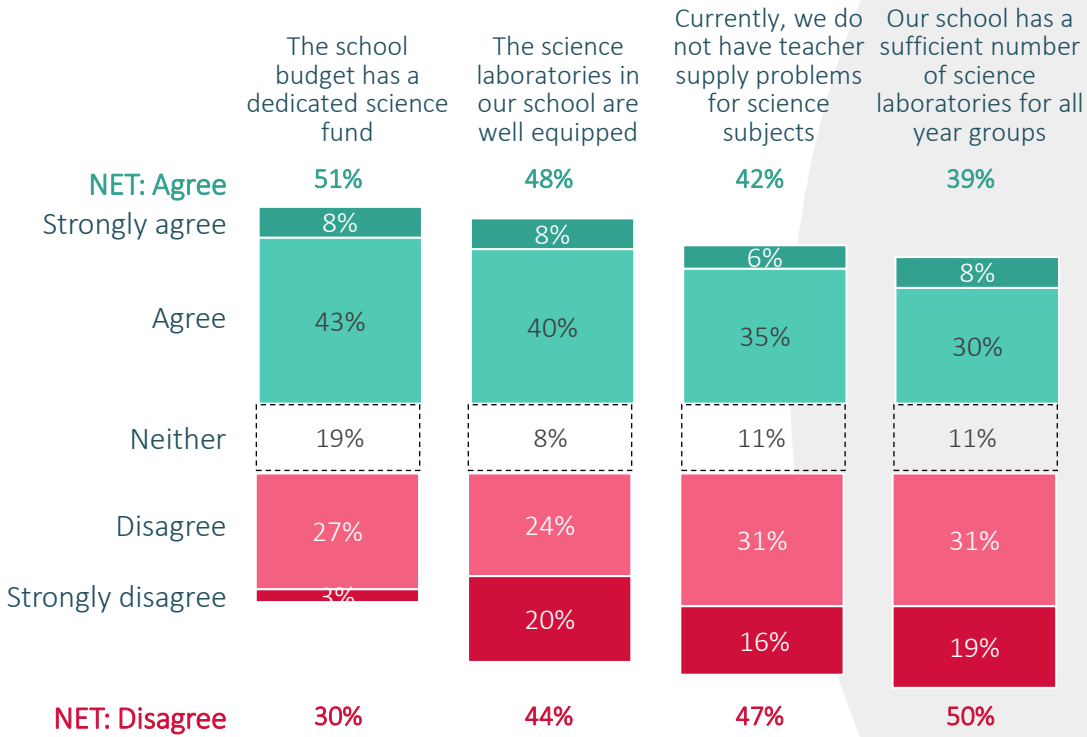
Curriculum Change at Senior Cycle

Resources Needed For Successful Curriculum Change At Senior Cycle



Q. In your opinion, what are the necessary resources for successful curriculum change at Senior Cycle?
(Base: All School Leaders; n=96)

School Capacity For Revised Science Specifications



Q. The Department plans to introduce revised science specifications in all schools in September 2025. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about your schools' science facilities/resources in terms of the schools' readiness for the revised science specifications.

(Base: All School Leaders; n=96)

6

Key Themes

Qualitative Feedback in Open Questions: Key Themes 1

Overwhelming Workload and Administrative Burden

- The dominant and pervasive theme is the unsustainable workload and the sheer volume of administrative tasks placed upon school leaders. Principals and deputy principals repeatedly mentioned the relentless stream of new initiatives, circulars, and policies from the Department of Education and other agencies, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and unable to prioritise teaching and learning. The latter is the most valued part of their role and not being able to give the necessary time and attention to this complex professional domain is both upsetting and stressful. Rather than leading, school leaders are constantly firefighting.
- Heavy workload is compounded by a lack of adequate administrative supports. Both principals and deputy principals have to engage in time-consuming administrative tasks in relation to finance, record keeping, compilation and recording of administrative reports, etc. Having to constantly respond to timetabling contingencies in response to teacher shortages, sick leave, etc, is time consuming and school leaders are constantly conscious of the impact of timetabling problems on students in the classrooms.
- The excessive workload is taking a serious toll on school leaders' well-being; stress levels are high – and have been present for a long time. Many reported health issues such as high blood pressure and problems with eating and sleeping. Many expressed concerns about the sustainability of their roles, with some contemplating leaving the profession altogether. The toll their job is taking on their families and home life was also widely referenced.

Qualitative Feedback in Open Questions: Key Themes 2

Lack of Support and Resources

- Unsurprisingly, given the workload and role overload, lack of support and resources for school leadership was also a pervasive theme. Resources include administrative supports such as school secretaries and caretakers, adequate funding for schools, inadequate supports for students with behavioural and emotional difficulties including access to therapeutic and youth mental health services. Many also stated that they felt ill-equipped to adequately respond to the many complex situations experienced on a daily basis in schools such as complaints about bullying, managing inter-staff relationships and HR issues, parental complaints, and child safeguarding issues. Lack of time to engage in professional learning and personal growth activities compounds the sensation of firefighting rather than leading as referenced above.
- The current allocation model of in-school leadership posts is widely regarded as inadequate to meet the complex organisational needs of schools. More posts are needed to ensure that team structures – as required under many whole-school policies, special educational provision, new curriculum programmes – are in place. School leaders are also aware of teachers' workload and their experience of stress and burnout and are reluctant to delegate additional duties and roles to them.
- School leaders were universally of the view that the constraints on schools' capacities are not understood or considered by those making policy decisions and expressed frustration over the disconnect between government and societal expectations and the realities on the ground, particularly in relation to inclusivity and special educational needs. An emerging theme in relation to inadequate school capacity to meet students' needs was a perception that parents had become more demanding, even aggressive, in their communications with school leaders.

Qualitative Feedback in Open Questions: Key Themes 3

Teacher Supply and Retention

- The challenges of teacher supply and retention is proving to be very demoralising for school leaders. The teacher supply crisis is getting worse each year and school leaders are not only spending more on securing substitute teachers but also on themselves having to provide substitution and/or supervision to classes. In addition, school leaders expressed feelings that they were letting the students down by not being able to provide continuity in their subject teachers, especially for students in 5th and 6th years and for students with special educational needs.
- School leaders were explicit in stating that difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers are in large part attributable to the declining attractiveness of teaching as a profession. Teaching is widely perceived as having a heavy workload, multiple and competing role demands and lack of work-life balance. The issue is seen as particularly acute for leadership positions, with a decline in applications and instances of principals stepping down. The impact of teacher absences in the context of difficulty in securing substitute cover is increasingly contributing to disruption and increased workload for school leaders.

Curriculum change at Senior Cycle

- Senior Cycle curriculum change is a major source of stress and concern for school leaders – largely due to teacher supply problems and inadequate number of in-school leadership posts. Many leaders expressed feeling unprepared and under-resourced for the changes, citing insufficient whole-school training, lack of clarity on the curriculum and a rushed implementation schedule. They are also worried about the practicalities of the new assessment components, the impact of over assessment on student well-being and the potential for increased workload for teachers. Many school leaders mentioned over-crowding in classrooms and the wider school environment as constraints on curriculum innovation. Moreover, the need for teachers to have the full suite of examination-related materials available in advance of the introduction of new subject specifications was, in school leaders' view, not sufficiently appreciated by the Department of Education.

Qualitative Feedback in Open Questions: Key Themes 4

Concerns around additional assessment components and AI

- The shift towards 40% for additional assessment components has sparked significant concerns regarding fairness, integrity and teacher and student workload. School leaders share teachers' fears that the introduction of additional assessment components in all subjects, without clear guidelines on AI or marking schemes, is open to many pitfalls. There is a widespread belief that AI-generated content could compromise the authenticity of students' project-work. There are also concerns about the increased administrative burden of digital uploading of project work to the State Examinations Commission.
- The lack of guidance from the Department of Education on AI in education generally is causing increased anxiety among both school leaders and classroom teachers. The challenges it presents have not been sufficiently addressed. School leaders are also of the view that insufficient account is taken of their concerns that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will be disproportionally impacted by the increasing use of digital technologies in the state examinations process. To ensure a fair and effective assessment system, school leaders are calling for clearer policies, better safeguards, and a reconsideration of the weighting of project work.

What Leaders Are Saying…

Overwhelming Workload and Administrative Burden

1. *The day goes by and I enjoy it, but there are too many spinning plates at the one time.*

2. *My day begins at 5.00am when I leave home and it could be 10.00pm when I sometimes return home.*

3. *The school principal is head of HR, the CEO, and the CFO.*

4. *Being a principal is a privilege... but I spend all my time pushing paper.*

5. *We have Bí Cineálta, new TY spec, Senior Cycle subjects, new SET guidelines and also will be engaging, most likely, with new CoB guidelines. It's too much for all to productively engage with properly.*

6. *I have zero work-life balance.*

What Leaders Are Saying…

Lack of Support and Resources

1. *An Admin Assistant in all schools would be hugely helpful in reducing the workload and stress of senior management.*

2. *There is a disconnect between Department expectations and the reality on the ground; schools are floundering.*

3. *The school server is under serious capacity pressure with the increase in computer aided projects.*

4. *Lack of lab assistants, teaching assistants, nurses, IT assistants, bursars and so on.*

5. *Schools are now providing meals, books, copies, emotional support, SEN provision, wellbeing supports, academic supports, vaccination stations ... and we are simply not equipped to do so.*

6. *Behavioural problems take up a huge chunk of the day.*

7. *Parents are increasingly difficult to deal with.*

What Leaders Are Saying…

Teacher Supply and Retention

1. *Initiative overload, teacher supply and retention, lack of parental support, aggression from students and parents, behavioural issues amongst students and the lack of respect for the teaching profession have made this career a very difficult one in recent years.*

2. *Croke Park hours are a massive issue, so many teachers are stressed and exhausted by late evenings for PTMs.*

3. *Small schools with Deputies who teach are compromised constantly; they have massive issues in rural deprived areas.*

4. *Registration with the Teaching Council takes 9+ months!*

5. *Teacher supply continues to be the number one issue in Dublin.*

6. *Croke Park hours are leading to burnout.*

What Leaders Are Saying…

Curriculum change at Senior Cycle

1. *Educational progression must be a continuum.*
2. *I love interacting with the fabulous young people but I can no longer endure the incessant change!*
3. *The Junior Cycle has demotivated our best and brightest with the ridiculous grading and banding.*
4. *It is welcome but the overall burden and timing of things needs to be considered.*
5. *Teachers need to be trained- there is an attitude of "learning on the job" and a blatant disregard for professional development requirements.*
6. *We aren't equipped with the IT or the labs for AACs.*
7. *Too much, too fast.*

What Leaders Are Saying…

Concerns around additional assessment components and AI

1. *AI will create a digital chasm between DEIS and non-DEIS schools.*

2. *Soon we will need oral interviews for projects, to prove students' knowledge.*

3. *The AI 'elephant' is a legal challenge – how do you define a student's "own work"?*

4. *Clear guidelines please!*

THANK YOU

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