Educator Occupational Wellbeing Research Series 2026

Phase Three:
School Principals in the Republic of Ireland

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU Create

Executive Summary
Key Findings 2026

School principals occupy a critical position within contemporary education systems, exercising leadership responsibilities that influence organisational effectiveness, teacher wellbeing, school climate, and student outcomes.

Consequently, the sustainability of school leadership has emerged as an increasingly important concern within educational research and policy discourse.

Irish school principals are responsible for the overall leadership and the daily management of schools in Ireland. They lead teaching and learning, support staff and students, manage school policies and resources, liaise with external agencies and ensure compliance with educational regulations set by the Department of Education and Youth.

Principals play a key role in maintaining a positive learning environment and promoting the holistic development of pupils and the personal development of all within the school community.

This mixed-methods* study examines occupational wellbeing among primary and secondary-level school principals in the Republic of Ireland, drawing on data from over 900 participants.

This report constitutes Phase Three of the DCU CREATE Educator Occupational Wellbeing series. Previous reports examined the occupational wellbeing of teachers in both the Republic and Northern Ireland.

ROI teachers:

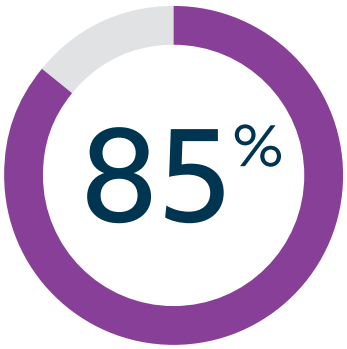
www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/inline-files/dcu-create_teacher-burnout-think-tank_summary-report.pdf

NI teachers:

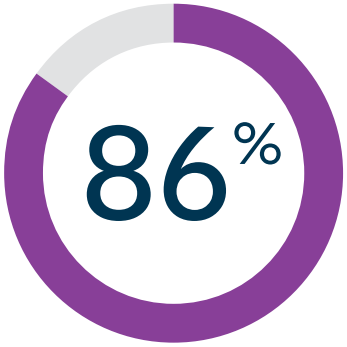
www.dcu.ie/create/teacher-occupational-wellbeing-research-2026

Key Findings

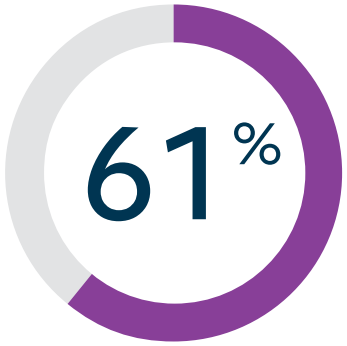
Principals reporting moderate to high levels of **personal-related** burnout



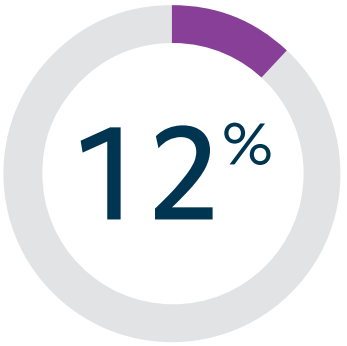
Principals reporting moderate to high levels of **work-related** burnout



Principals reporting moderate to high levels of **parent-related** burnout

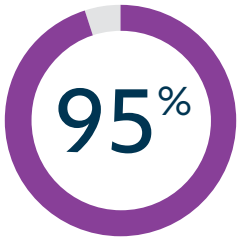


Principals reporting moderate to high **student-related** burnout

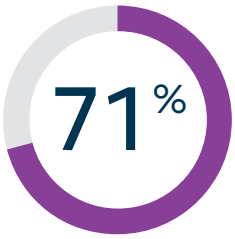


Key Factors Contributing to Principal Burnout in the Republic of Ireland 2026

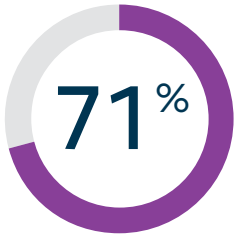
Workload as a contributor to burnout



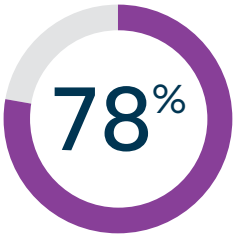
Unrealistic parental expectations



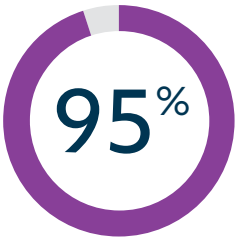
The structure of work and organisational issues



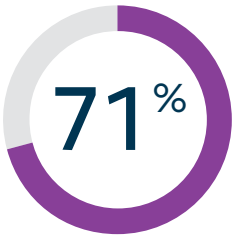
The challenges in leading Special Education Needs (SEN) provision



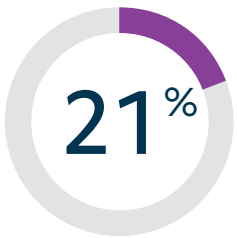
Unrealistic expectations from the Department of Education and Youth



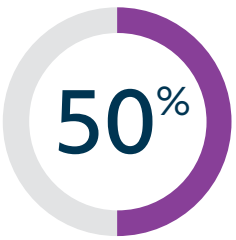
Dealing with outside agencies



Broader school culture

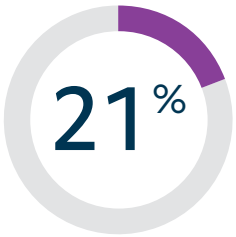


Physical working conditions or environment



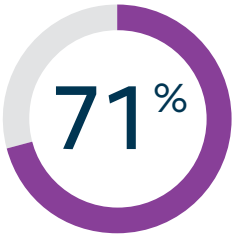
Key Factors Contributing to Principal Burnout in the Republic of Ireland 2026

Lack of collegiality with colleagues

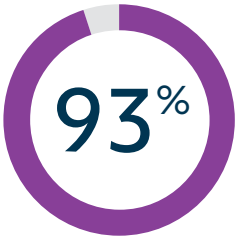


Pupil management

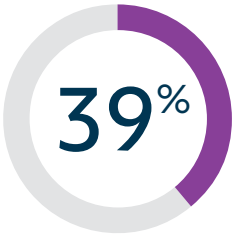
Inadequate resources in their school



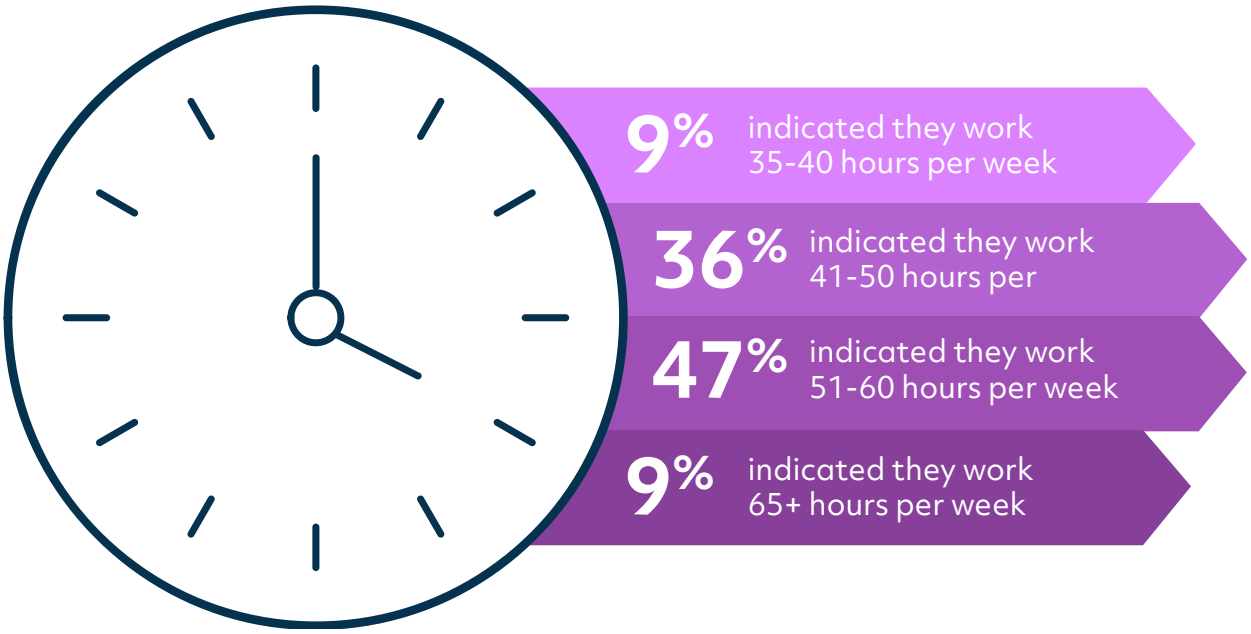
Role expectations



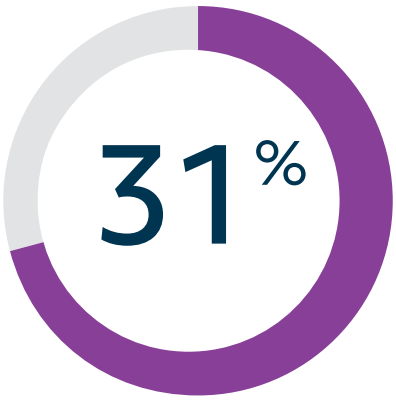
Negative social media commentary



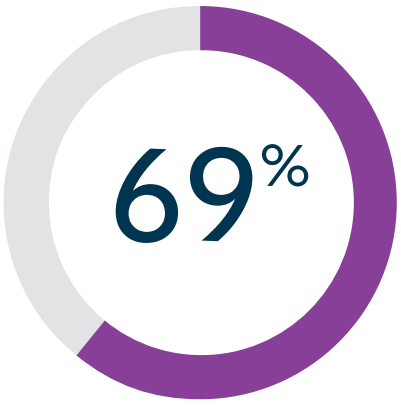
Working Hours



Recuperation Time



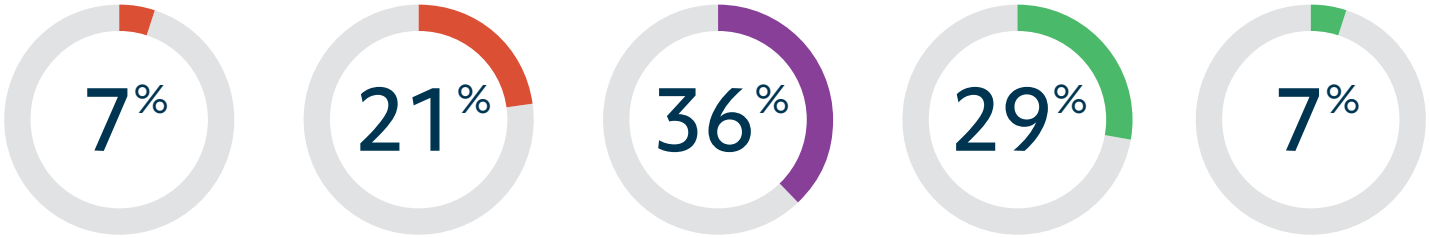
of participants reported that they are able to avail of their annual leave entitlements.



of participants indicated they cannot avail of their annual leave entitlements.

Mental Health of School Principals

SELF-REPORT OF MENTAL HEALTH



Very Poor | Poor | Average | Good | Excellent

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

81%

of participants indicated they found the state mental health support services for principals and teachers to be very poor/poor.

IMPACT ON LEADING IN THE SCHOOL

28%

of the principals who reported poor/very poor mental health indicated that this has negatively influenced their ability to lead in their school.

18%

of principals indicated a low sense of personal accomplishment.

2 in 10

principals indicated they are unlikely to continue in their role of principal over the coming year.

Understanding Principal Burnout in Ireland 2026

Principals go into the job to lead teaching and learning; however, a series of factors complicate the ability to do the job

"Not actually having a job remit"

"Always on" in work mode, even at weekends and holidays. Multi-faceted role, all things to all people, HR, finance. Building, maintenance and then there may be time for education!"

"The 'everything stops with the Principal' attitude is both emotionally and physically draining. The expectation of the role of Principal is becoming unattainable"

"The role of a teaching principal is all-consuming, and I am exhausted all the time. I spend most of my weekends and holiday time doing school work too."

"Feeling of being in it alone"

"As a school principal you are responsible for everything from the toilets, heating, school maintenance, HR, leading teaching and learning etc etc. also responsible for strategy and school improvement"

"A principal makes hundreds of micro-decisions on how the school is run, etc. daily. This mental fatigue can lead to what feels like physical fatigue/exhaustion."

"Too many demands on one person, demands from staff and parents, the level of support from outside agencies dropping, the fact that none of our children with extremely complex needs are getting the support they need outside of school from the HSE/ other agencies, the school is now a place where children learn everything, there is a crisis in parenting"

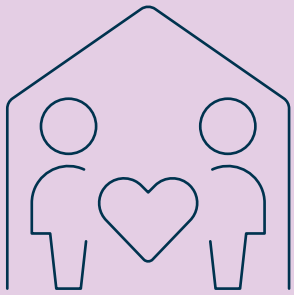
"I strive to do the best I can but it's impossible to do it all. The guilt is terrible"

"As a principal I am supposed to be in charge of teaching and learning. I cannot tell you the last time I worked on anything teaching and learning related! I am expected to know about solar panels, leaking roofs, replacing taps and all sorts of other building-related items. I do not know how this job is sustainable; in fact, I am extremely close to quitting. "

"Every organisation just wants to pass the buck and we are left dealing with the fallout. These are real families, real people, that are vulnerable and need support, how can we fail them like this….we have links with all sorts of agencies, we go out of our way to help people, and yet it never feels like enough"

Protective Factors for Principals

In this study, principals were asked to identify the 'protective factors' that support their experience of wellbeing in the workplace. Their responses are compiled under 6 interconnecting themes.



Family Support

" I have a very happy home life and a very supportive family"

"My family, full stop!"

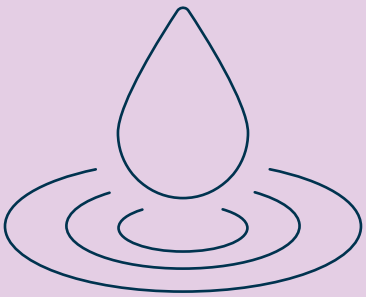
"I am very lucky and privileged in my personal life, but if it wasn't as good as it is with family and friendship support, I couldn't be a principal!"

Making a difference

"A belief in my job and the difference it makes to the opportunities of young people"

"A sense that I am making a difference to others"

"That what I do matters. That I am surrounded by people who have similar beliefs, and that everyone contributes to the best of their ability. That parental confidence in the school is high and that parents trust that we try to do the best for the children"



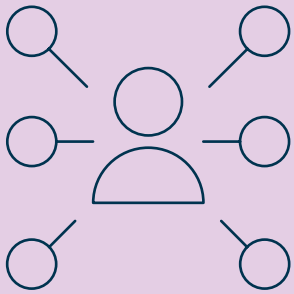
Purposefully making efforts to maintain good physical and psychological well-being

"Sleep, exercise, time with family, healthy diet"

"Positive mindset, positive family relationships, supportive family, daily exercise"

"Setting clear boundaries with parents and staff, keeping time for my family only, and looking for the positives in my work every day"

Protective Factors for Principals



School Principal Networks

"Networks built up through personal means and connections with outside agencies"

"Getting to know other principals and building a support network"

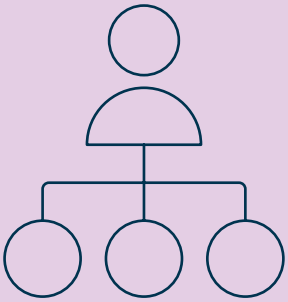
"Local principal cluster/support group, Informal consultation with a fellow principal, Patron Body / Education Secretariat"

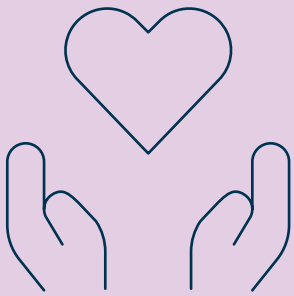
Support and positive connections with the leadership team

"A strong, trusted deputy and senior leadership team"

"An amazing Deputy Principal and AP1s"

"Good relationship with Deputy Principals helps when discussing and sharing thoughts on frustrating situations"





Support and affirmation from the school community

"Gratitude from students, staff or parents"

"I have a super team of people working with me, including our school secretary, SNAs and teachers. We work hard to build strong relationships with one another, and we are there for one another. My school secretary is a rock of support."

"I'm also fortunate that a number of teachers in the school are former pupils, and they return to the school because they believe in the school and what we do, which is a great honour to the work we have done as a staff in the past"

*In this study, a burnout measure **(The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory)** was used alongside a researcher-designed questionnaire.

This Executive Report has been jointly prepared by the **DCU CREATE Educator Occupational Wellbeing Research Team:**

Dr Sabrina Fitzsimons
Professor Catherine Furlong
Dr Pia O'Farrell
Dr Damien Burke

DCU Centre for Collaborative Research Across Teacher Education,
Institute of Education, Dublin City University

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