



National Principals' Forum

The Inclusion Illusion

A Survey of Irish Primary

Principals on Special Education

Provision in Irish Primary Schools

Introduction

The National Principals' Forum (NPF) is a registered grassroots lobby group of Primary School Principal Teachers, established in May 2018. The group seeks to work with the Minister for Education, Management Bodies and Representative Bodies to affect urgent changes needed to sustain us in our roles as school leaders. As principals, we strive to do our best to be as inclusive as possible in our schools.

The Forum has surveyed principals on a number of occasions around the issue of workload and established some worrying statistics. For example, 98.9% of principals reported that their workload is a sizable to unsustainable challenge; and 7 in 10 principals reported that if they could they would step down from the position.

In this survey, we focused on Special Educational Needs provision in primary schools in Ireland. With all the talk of Special Education in the media since the beginning of the academic year, the NPF were interested in finding out how principals were feeling about many aspects of its provision in their schools. The survey was completed by over 900 principals in less than 2 weeks and the following pages summarise the results of the survey with commentary from members of the administration team.

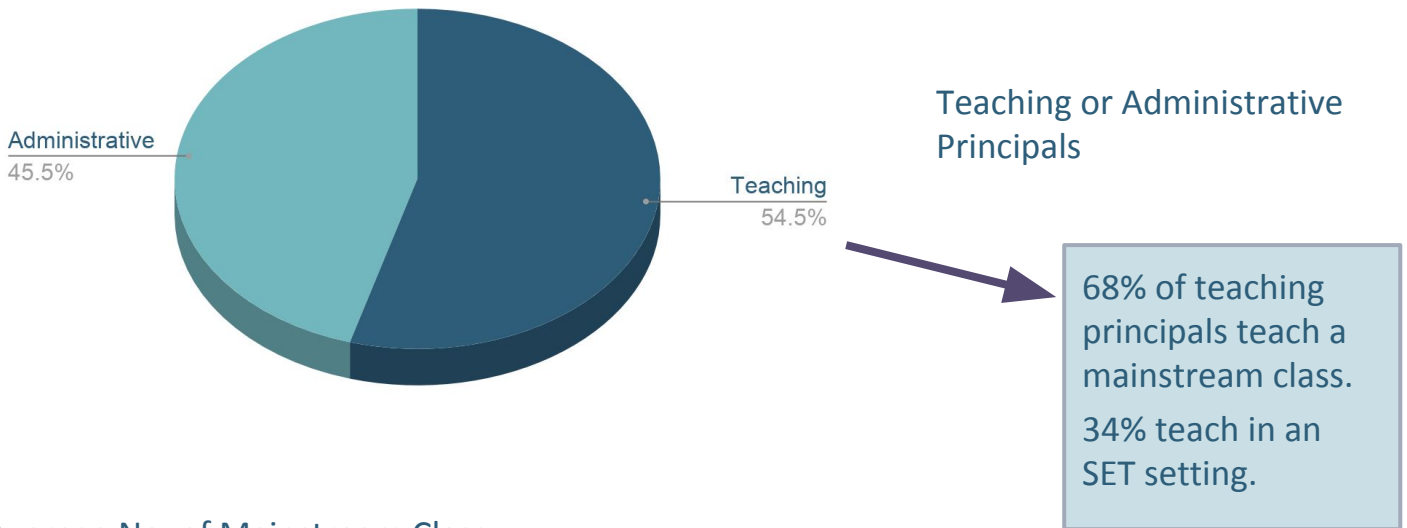
The results are stark.

Principals are pleading for supports for children with additional needs and are simply getting buffered by red tape from every angle. Whether applying or appealing for supports, the amount of paperwork is unnecessarily long and doesn't guarantee any positive outcome. The survey demonstrates that the DES is not supporting the needs of children or their teachers or principals in this country. It is hoped that the representative bodies for primary education will utilise this data in order to campaign for better outcomes.

The National Principals' Forum Admin Team.

October 2019

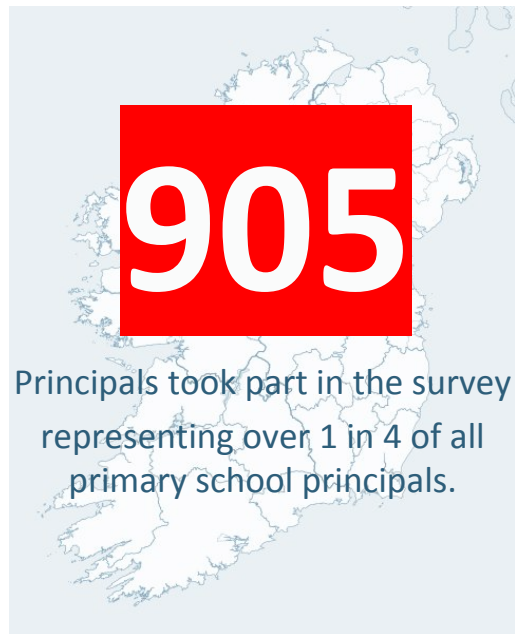
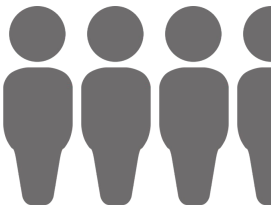
Who Took the Survey?



Average No. of Mainstream Class Teachers in Schools



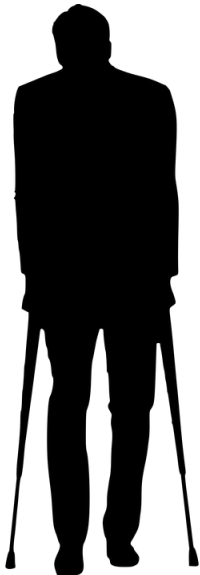
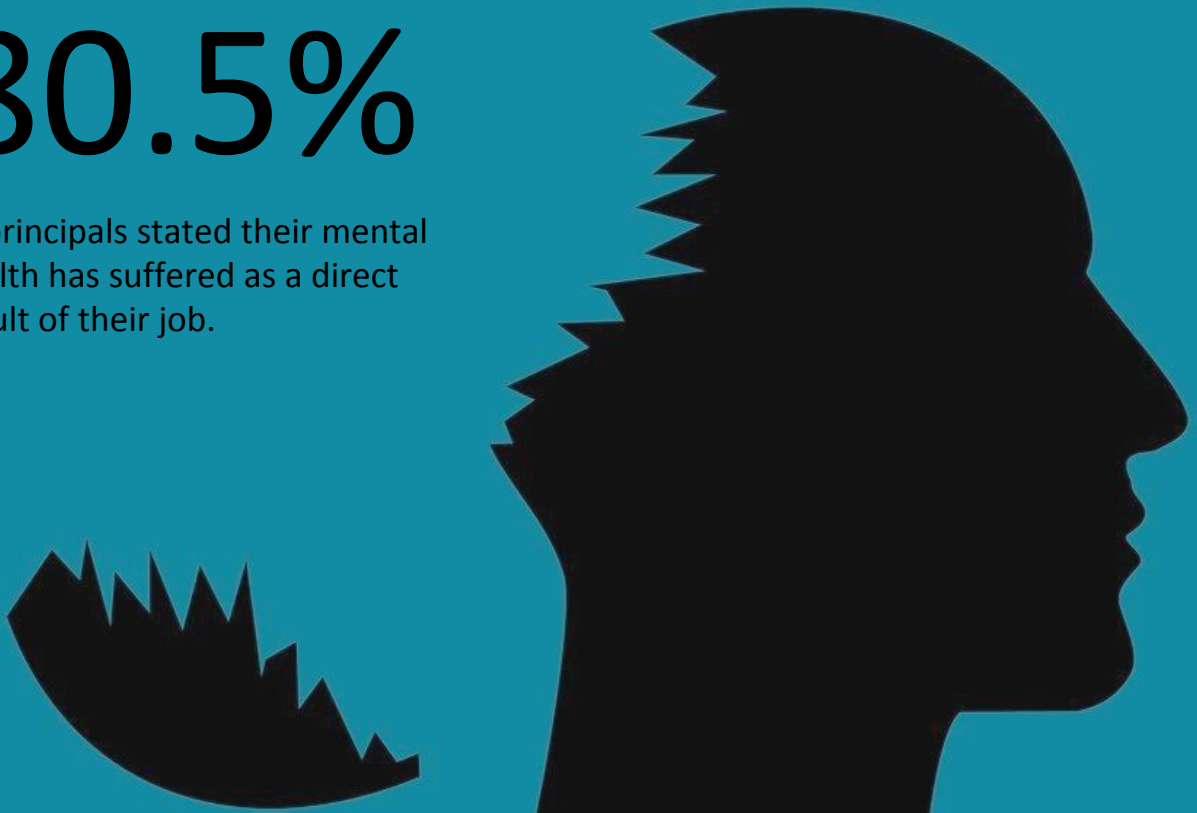
Average No. of Special Education Teachers (SETs) in Schools



Principals and their Health

80.5%

of principals stated their mental health has suffered as a direct result of their job.

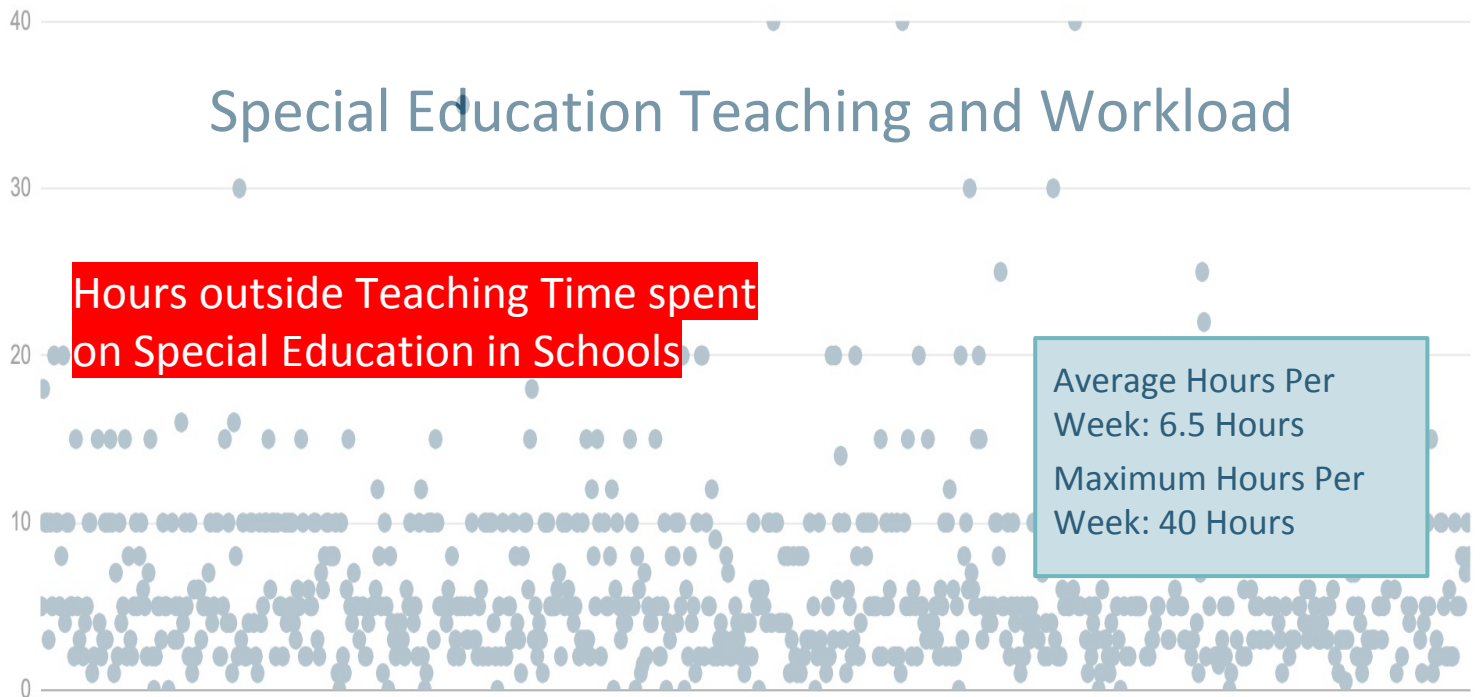


76.5%

of principals stated their physical health has suffered as a direct result of their job.

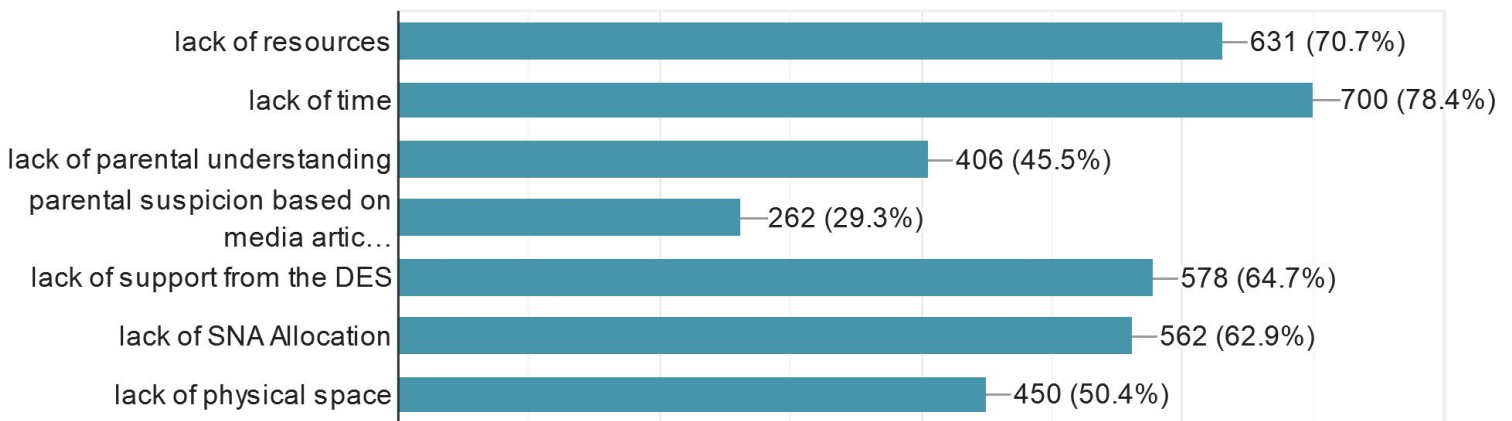
The National Principals Forum has asked these questions in every survey. These percentages have increased from 71% and 68% respectively since October 2018.

Special Education Teaching and Workload



1 in 11 principals surveyed reported that they spend more than 10 hours per week, on average, working on special education matters alone. In a previous survey an average of 75% of teaching principals stated they worked 20-30 hours per week in addition to their teaching.

What challenges do principals face supporting pupils with additional needs?



Covering Classes

Principals that have had to regularly use a special education teacher to cover mainstream absences due to sub crisis.

73%

Principals that have had to regularly use a special education teacher (SET) to cover mainstream absences due to uncertified leave.

68%

Since 2009, if a teacher was sick with uncertified leave, the first day of the absence was not covered by a substitute. In 2012, all uncertified leave was not covered. These absences either had to be covered by another member of staff, i.e. a suitably qualified teacher, i.e. a member of the SEN team. The other option would be to split the class between the other teachers. Perhaps if it were only uncertified illness that wasn't covered by a substitute, schools might cope with splitting classes, due to the fact that so few teachers take uncertified leave. However, there is no longer substitute cover for a number of other forms of brief absences, and many CPD courses do not provide substitute cover. That's even if there is a substitute available! There is currently a crisis of a lack of trained substitute teachers in Ireland.

Breastfeeding Breaks

- 80% of schools do not have a designated room for their staff to take breastfeeding breaks.
- 4% of principals reported that they left their office for the staff member to use his/her room.
- 1 principal remarked how a teacher had no other choice than to pump in a toilet.
- 40% of principals covered the break for the staff member
- 32% reported that special education teachers covered the break for the staff member
- Other answers varied from not providing any cover to regular rotas.
- There is no provision for cover for breastfeeding breaks from the Department of Education.
- 64% of principals reported that their school did not have appropriate facilities for the teacher to wash pump equipment.
- 52.5% reported that there was no suitable place for milk to be stored.



SET Allocations

The new SET allocation(2017) model was designed to be fairer to families who required resources for children with additional needs. In the “old” model different diagnoses were allocated a certain amount of resource hours. For example, children with a diagnosis of Autism were originally allocated 5 hours of resource teaching per week. (This was cut during the recession to 4.25 hours and was never restored.) The new allocation model gave schools a certain number of hours based on new criteria. We asked principals: if you were to apply the "Low Incidence" Resource hours now as opposed to the new system in place, would you have more or less hours than you currently have?

43.6%

stated they would have MORE hours if the older model was in place. HOWEVER when one incorporates the 15% cut to Resource Hours in 2012, the percentage goes up to

88.4%

In other words, almost 9 out of 10 schools receive less support time for children with additional needs than they would have had in 2012. Principals are asked to provide a “loaves and fishes” style provision, being charged with manifesting this miracle.

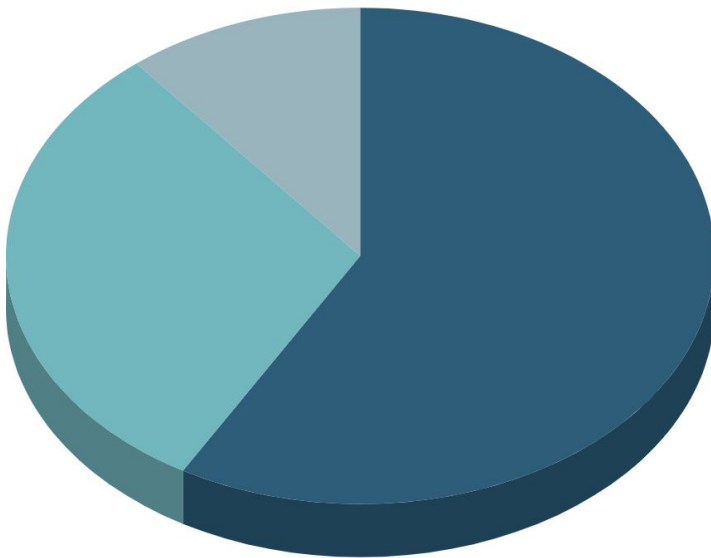
61%

of principals said the last SET allocation was inadequate for the needs of their school

SET Allocations (cont...)

Every two years, schools are allocated a total SET allocation of a number of hours per week. 25 hours makes up a full, permanent teaching post. Anything below or in excess must be clustered with at least one other school. Schools race to the phone to find another school to partner with as soon as the allocations come out in a process that is colloquially known as “The Cluster Games.” We asked principals whether they think the Department of Education should organise the clusters to make up full time posts or not.

- The DES should organise this
- The current system where schools organise this is fine
- I have no opinion on this



26%

of principals have appealed their SET allocation.

8%

of the above principals were successful in their appeal.

It is worth noting that one of the main reasons that only 26% appealed their allocation was due to the arduous workload involved and poor success rate. As one can see, 92% were unsuccessful in their appeal.

Managing SNAs and Bus Escorts

89.1% of principals believe they should be paid to manage SNAs in their school.

85.3% of principals believe they should be paid to manage bus escorts in their school.

A principal's allowance is calculated by how many teaching staff they manage. Currently **principals are unpaid for managing any staff other than teachers in their school.** They receive no extra allowance for managing SNAs, bus escorts, secretaries or caretakers. In Special Schools, a principal could be managing 100 members of staff but only being paid for 10. In fact a whole other scrutiny needs to be carried out to look in depth at the specific anomalies with special schools.

93%

of schools have at least 1 SNA

21%

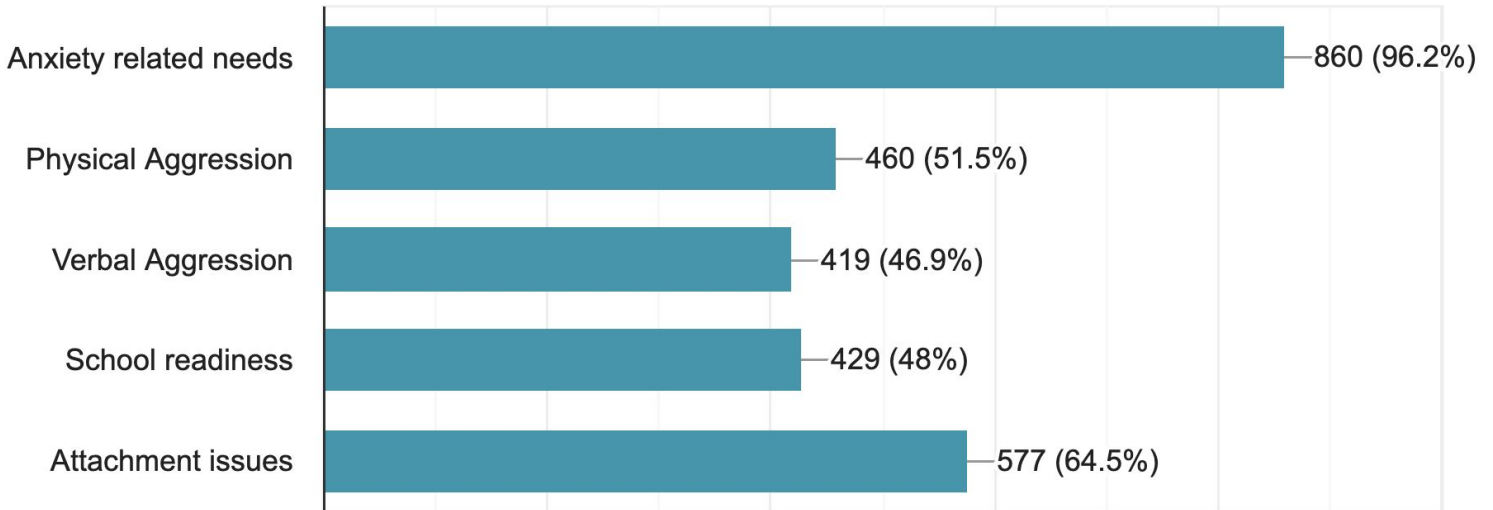
of schools have at least 1 bus escort

46%

of principals said they spend as much or more time managing SNAs

Children in our Care

In the last 5 years, principals have noticed an increase in children in relation to:



64%

of principals reported that a child has hurt a member of staff. 33% say this happens regularly.

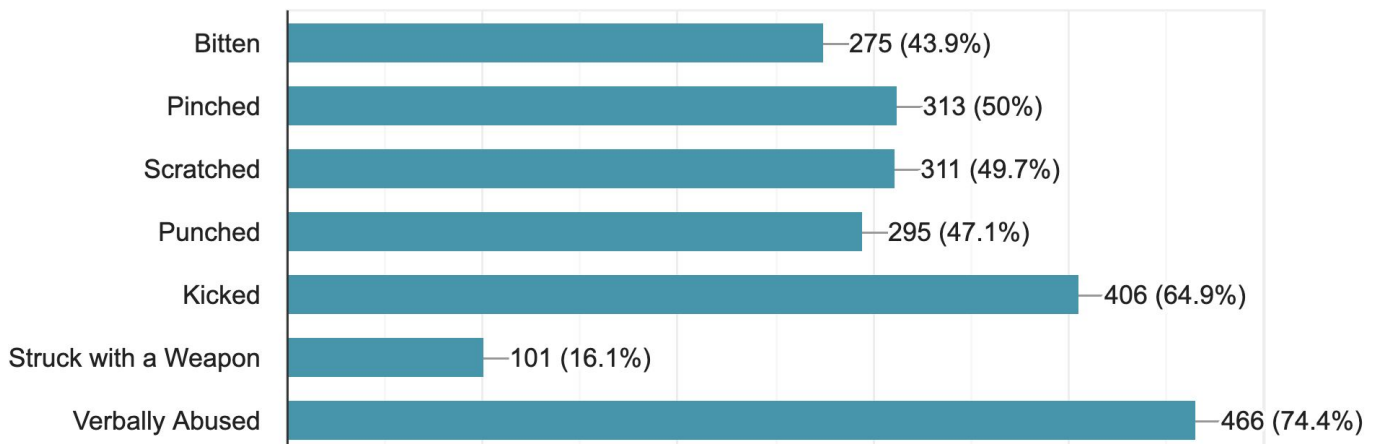
21%

reported that a staff member has required medical help after being attacked by a child.

64%

reported that they have had to restrain a child on at least one occasion.

In the last year, principals stated that staff members have been:



Special Classes

24.6% of schools have Special Classes.

88.9%

of principals said they don't believe the DES should force a school to open a special class against its wishes.

3.6%

of principals said they were happy they opened their classes and had no complaints.

19.5%

of teaching principals admitted they opened special classes in order to become administrative principals.

While the majority of principals reported that they were happy that they opened up special classes, only a tiny minority (3.6%) had no complaints. 36.9% of principals reported that it has increased their workload and a further 47.2% agreed that Special Classes are great but cannot work optimally without improved NCSE supports and DES supports.

90.1%

of principals believe that the NCSE do not provide adequate supports for children with additional needs.



NEPS & Visiting Teachers

87.8% of principals reported that there are children awaiting psychological input from NEPS.

60% of principals reported that children are waiting more than one year for NEPS input.

59.4% of principals have funded a private psychological assessment for a child due to the waiting times for NEPS.

63% of principals reported that they required the services of a visiting teacher for either the blind, the deaf or for Down's Syndrome.

56.1% of principals reported that the service provided was inadequate for the children's needs.

Shortened Days

52.6%

of principals said they placed at least one child on a shortened day.

7.5%

of principals said they have placed more than 2 children on a shortened day.

96.5%

of principals believed media coverage about shortened days was unfair.

Expulsions



95%

of principals believe the DES does not provide adequate behavioural supports

0.6%

Only
of schools have expelled more than 2 pupils.

Irish Exemptions



56%

of principals are unhappy with the new Irish Exemptions Circular. (16% happy, 28% neither)

87%

of principals say the circular will increase their workload.

19%

of principals believe the circular will improve educational outcomes for children.

Wellbeing

78%

of teachers have reported for work when unwell.

5.4%

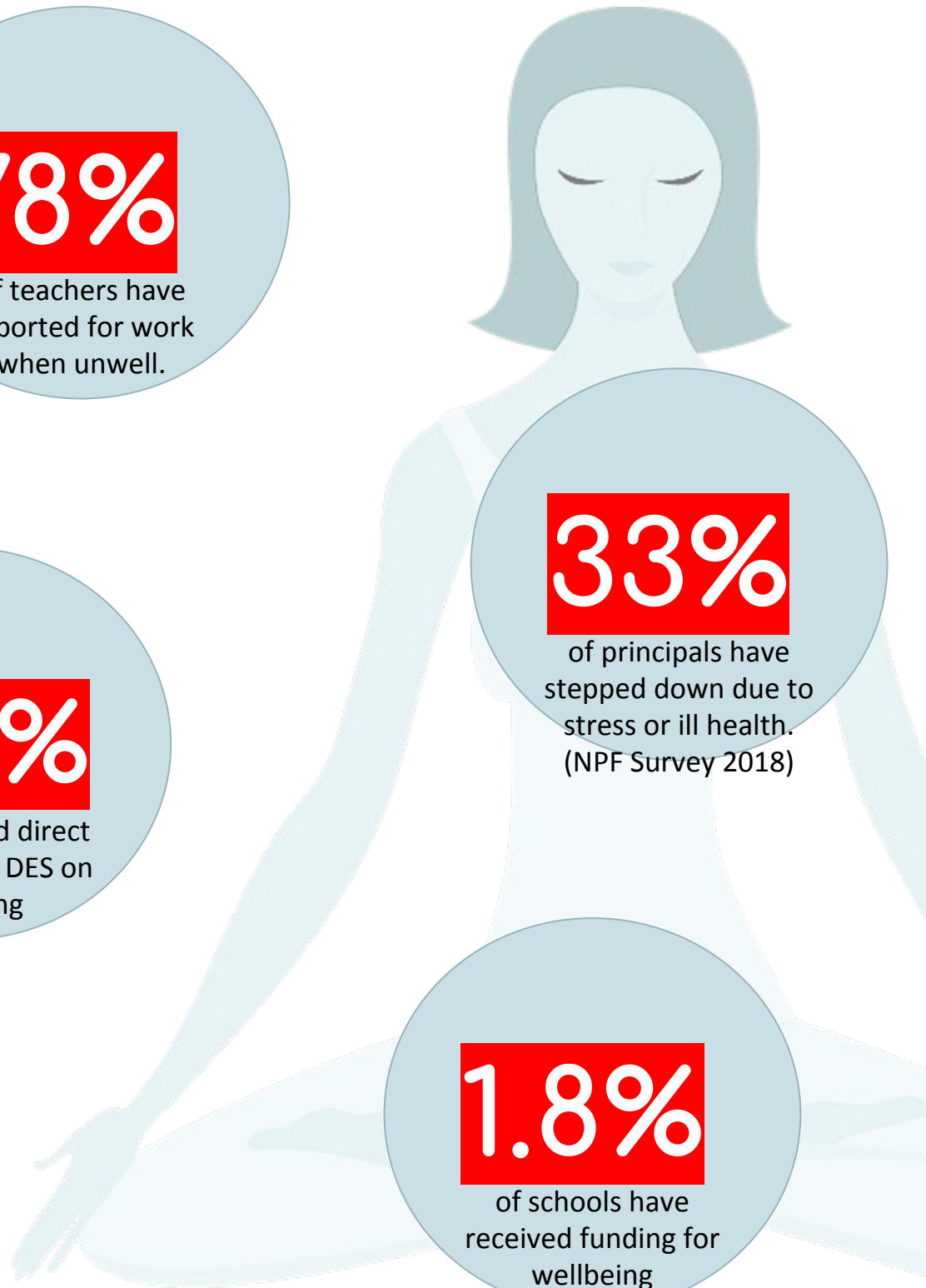
have received direct training from DES on wellbeing

33%

of principals have stepped down due to stress or ill health.
(NPF Survey 2018)

1.8%

of schools have received funding for wellbeing



Conclusion

The National Principals' Forum survey that Special Educational Needs provision in Ireland is continuing to decline, despite the spin-doctored statements from the NCSE and Department of Education. It is astonishing that despite being charged with improving the delivery of education services to children with special educational needs, the NCSE continue to support, and even celebrate, the lack of adequate investment in this essential area. It is no surprise to the Forum that over 90% of principals expressed no confidence in the NCSE.

The most startling figure of all found by the survey was that 88.4% of principals agreed that they have less SET time under the new SET Allocation Model than they would have had in the older allocation model in 2012. The Department of Education stated that the new model was designed to be a better and fairer way to give schools additional teaching supports to help children with special educational needs. This appears to be entirely untrue when almost all schools have lost time to support children with additional needs.

On top of this, the health and wellbeing of the principals, and indeed teachers, trying to safeguard our pupils, in particular those with additional needs, already disadvantaged by a system that is unfit for purpose, is being continually exploited and eroded. This survey demonstrates that the system is past breaking point with only dedicated but weary and demoralised staff to hold back the tide. Over 8 out of 10 principals reported that their mental health has suffered because of their job.

Parents' knowledge and understanding of SEN-related provisions in schools is not where it needs to be, and government and media spin doctoring serves to exploit this to pit parents and schools against one another, blaming the latter for the failings of the DES. It is no wonder that almost 99% of principals reported that media coverage was unfair.

Parents' battles for education are schools' battles too and we need to ensure that parent and advocacy bodies have the information they need to join us in a united battle for better for our children. Simple things such as asking the government to provide adequate substitute cover for leave would help a little, (7 out of 10 principals use a SET teacher to cover a mainstream class due to absences,) or even for breastfeeding breaks, (32% of SET teachers cover these.)

The National Principals' Forum urges all representative bodies to utilise this survey to battle for the rights of pupils with additional needs and for the rights of teachers and principals to be respected.