

RESEARCH BRIEFING

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REDUCING THE BUREAUCRATIC BURDEN ON SCHOOLS

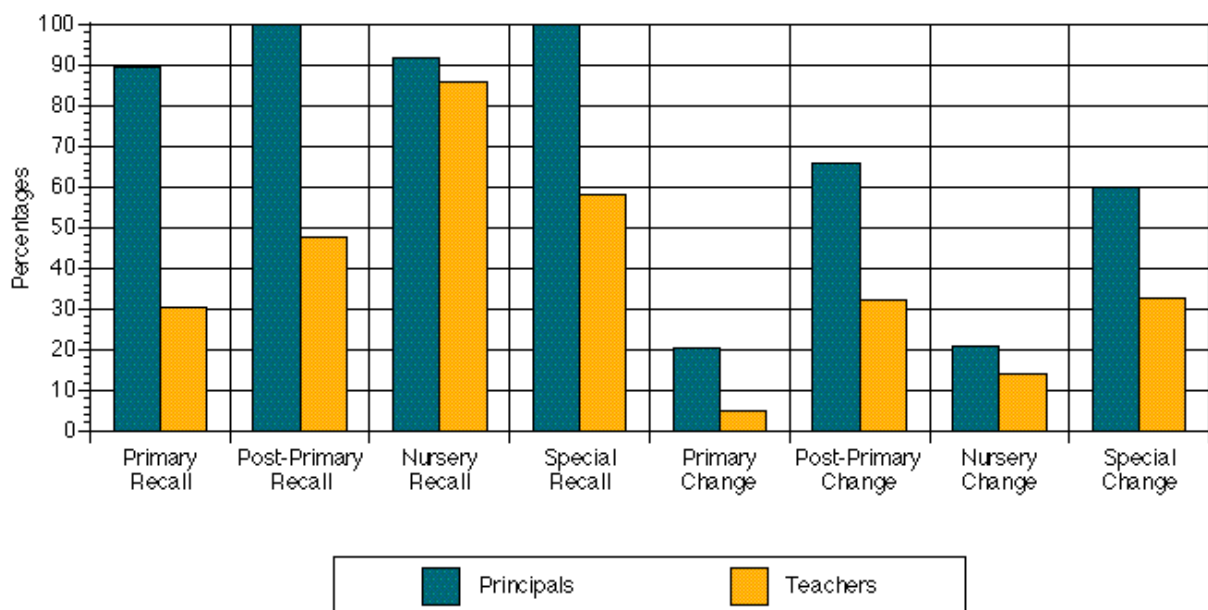
Key Findings

A questionnaire survey of principals and teachers in primary, post-primary, nursery and special schools found that:

- ◆ Despite recent moves to reduce 'the bureaucratic burden' on schools, such as the Department of Education Circular 1998/33, the administrative demands of various tasks were seldom thought to have diminished and in many cases were thought to have *increased* since publication of the Circular.
- ◆ Responses to checklists showed principals and teachers agreeing that preparation for inspections, coping with policy documentation generally and the paperwork for pupils with special educational needs or behavioural problems were among the most demanding specific administrative tasks. Teachers in all four sectors (nursery; primary; post-primary; and special) rated preparation for an inspection highest of all. In addition, new forms of assessment, such as Baseline Assessment or GNVQ, could prove very time-consuming to the teachers involved.

- ◆ Although some 60% of the principals of post-primary schools and of the non-teaching principals of primary schools were happy with the level of secretarial provision in their schools, some 70% of the principals of nursery schools and of the teaching principals of primary schools rated their secretarial provision as either 'inadequate' or 'non-existent'. Most teachers thought highly of their school secretaries but many teachers had little or no access to their services.
- ◆ Substantial use of the CLASS system was reported by a majority of both post-primary principals and of non-teaching primary principals. Less than half the other principals and only a small minority of the primary and special school teachers used CLASS at all. However, about half the teachers in post-primary schools made some use of CLASS.
- ◆ Nearly all the principals were previously aware of Circular 1998/33 but less than a third of the teachers in primary schools and less than half the teachers in post-primary schools could recall the Circular's arrival in their schools.

Figure 1: Impact of Circular 1998/33 in four types of schools



- ◆ Only about a fifth of the principals of primary and nursery schools reported changes in their schools resulting from Circular 1998/33, as compared with three fifths or more of the principals of post-primary and special schools. Such changes were identified by fewer of the teachers: a third of those in

post-primary and special schools and only one-in-twenty of those in primary schools. A number of respondents, however, reported recent administrative changes which they did not attribute to the Circular.

- ◆ The most frequently mentioned changes were reductions in the number of staff meetings and in the frequency of sending reports on pupils to parents.
- ◆ Many findings pointed towards the particularly heavy administrative demands made on the teaching principals of small schools for whom much of the advice about reducing bureaucracy in government circulars was not applicable. Many small schools were further handicapped by being unable to afford the secretarial staff they needed.
- ◆ The most frequent recommendations from respondents for further reducing 'the bureaucratic burden' were the appointment of more support staff, the allocation of earmarked time for teachers' administrative duties, greater use of ICT, cutting back the amount of documentation routinely sent to schools, a reduction in the paperwork required for inspections and in connection with the Code of Practice and trusting teachers to teach without inflicting so many accountability exercises upon them.

INTRODUCTION

1. It is generally agreed by principals, teachers, teacher unions and government that the changes in pupil assessment, school organisation and governance and in teacher accountability which followed the 1989 Education Reform Order (Northern Ireland) led to greatly increased administrative demands on principals and teachers. Similarly increased administrative demands have been recorded in other parts of the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

2. In separate surveys of teacher workloads conducted in 1998 by the Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU) and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) the main complaint was of the total size of the workload, and especially of the amount of administration, rather than of any individual task. Many of the administrative requirements seemed pointless to teachers. Although the response rates were lower than is desirable, the UTU and INTO surveys were able to highlight the particular difficulties faced by teaching principals, the time-consuming requirements to produce policies and documentation on all aspects of school life and the particularly onerous demands of the (then) very recent Code of Practice for pupils with special educational needs. Main recommendations included formally allocating time for teachers' administrative duties and more generous provision of secretarial and administrative assistance.

3. Surveys undertaken by or on behalf of teacher unions in other parts of the United Kingdom also found teachers struggling under heavy workloads and increasing administrative demands. A survey commissioned by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) reported that the tasks teachers most resented were low level administrative chores such as photocopying and collecting money and also the amount of paperwork for OFSTED inspections (Neill, 1998). More recent NUT surveys (1999, 2000) confirmed teachers' administrative pressures while in a survey carried out for the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) the most negatively rated administrative demands were in connection with OFSTED inspections and 'Documents from DfEE/QCA/TTA, etc.' (Osborne, 2000).

4. In response to representations from the teacher unions and other teacher groups, the Northern Ireland Department of Education issued its Circular 1998/33, *Reducing the Bureaucratic Burden on Schools*, on 16 December 1998. This circular offers advice about ways in which the administrative burden can be minimised within schools and commits the Department to considering, through consultation, measures aimed at reducing further unnecessary bureaucracy placed

on schools. A working group comprising representatives of the Department, Boards, CLASS, CCMS, CCEA, the NITC and schools was established to examine how both internal and external demands in schools can be reduced. A progress report was issued to schools in a Departmental letter of 19 January 2000, followed on 23 October 2000 by Circular 2000/13, *Cutting Bureaucracy: Guidance*, which offers further practical advice to schools. As part of the consultative process, the present research was commissioned to examine the impact on schools of Circular 1998/33 and to ascertain what, if anything, still needs to be done.

Aims of the Research

5. In addition to a review of previous surveys and research carried out on behalf of teacher unions in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom (see paragraphs 2 and 3), the research specification asked for a survey to be undertaken among principals and teachers at different levels in the school hierarchy in a representative sample of schools in order to ascertain:

- ◆ principals' and teachers' views of the current levels of administrative demands, their impact, their main sources and whether the position had changed since Circular 1988/33;
- ◆ awareness of Circular 1988/33 within schools;
- ◆ changes in schools following the Circular;
- ◆ what still needs to be done to reduce administrative demands on schools to acceptable levels.

FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

Perceptions of Current Administrative Demands

6. Although some of the administrative tasks facing teachers vary with the age and ability of their pupils, when rating the demands of over 20 items, teachers in all four sectors gave preparing for an inspection the highest mean rating of all (Table 1). They were also agreed that coping with policy documentation generally was very time-consuming. From primary, nursery and special schools came many complaints about the extra workload caused by the Code of Practice for pupils with

special educational needs, while for those in post-primary schools 'other pupil problems' ranked third. Also very demanding for the teachers involved were such new forms of assessment as Baseline Assessment in primary and nursery schools and GNVQ entries in secondary schools, although the demands of the more established forms of assessment and examination, such as end of Key Stage assessment and 'A' levels received considerably lower mean ratings, with the exception of the Transfer Procedure in primary schools.

Table 1: The Seven Most Demanding Tasks for Teachers (Means)

Primary Teachers	Mean	Post-Primary Teachers	Mean
Preparing for inspection	4.51	Preparing for inspection	3.89
Baseline Assessment	4.15	GNVQ entries and record keeping	3.71
Transfer Procedure	4.09	Other pupil problems	3.54
3-year projections for Board	3.93	Policy documentation generally	3.49
Policy documentation generally	3.88	Reporting to parents	3.47
Pupils with Special Educational Needs	3.85	New teachers, induction year etc.	3.32
Board Audit	3.75	Target setting/school improvement	3.25
Nursery School Teachers	Mean	Special School Teachers	Mean
Preparing for inspection	4.40	Preparing for inspection	4.40
Pupils with Special Educational Needs	4.00	Annual Review (of pupils)	3.57
Baseline Assessment	4.00	Policy documentation generally	3.56
Policy documentation generally	3.86	Individual Education Plans	3.53
Records of pupil progress	3.71	Transition Plan at 14+	3.50
Information to next (primary) school	3.43	Other pupil problems	3.41
Reporting to parents	2.86	Records of Achievement	3.39

7. Principals in all four sectors shared their teachers' concerns about the heavy administrative demands of preparing for an inspection and dealing with policy documentation (Table 2.). Again paralleling their teachers' responses, the principals of primary, nursery and special schools included items clearly related to the Code of Practice among their seven most demanding while post-primary principals seemed more concerned with behavioural problems, as reflected in their high ratings of

'other pupil problems' and 'suspensions and/or expulsions'. Certain other tasks seemed to be more demanding in some sectors than others: these included pupil admissions to nursery schools, the Transfer Procedure in primary schools, servicing the Boards of Governors in both primary and post-primary schools and 'links with outside agencies' in special schools. A number of other tasks, such as the monthly staffing returns and organising school transport seemed, however, to have become largely routine.

Table 2: The Seven Most Demanding Tasks for Principals

Primary Principals	Mean	Post-Primary Principals	Mean
Policy documentation generally	4.40	Preparing for inspection	4.05
Preparing for inspection	4.36	Servicing Boards of Governors	3.92
Pupils with Special Educational Needs	4.28	Other pupil problems	3.88
Servicing Boards of Governors	4.12	Policy documentation generally	3.85
Target setting/school improvement	4.11	Suspensions and/or expulsions	3.82
Transfer Procedure	4.04	Target setting/school improvement	3.77
New teachers, induction year etc.	3.97	3-year projections for Board	3.65
Nursery School Principals	Mean	Special School Principals	Mean
Pupil Admissions	4.54	Transition plans at 14+	4.69
Preparing for inspection	4.09	Annual review	4.53
Policy documentation generally	4.04	Individual Education Plans	3.92
Records of pupil progress	4.00	Other pupil problems	3.77
Baseline Assessment (leavers)	4.00	Preparing for inspection	3.77
Pupils with Special Educational Needs	3.82	Policy documentation generally	3.75
3-year projections for ELB	3.52	Links with agencies	3.67

8. Within the post-primary sector it was unsurprising that staff of secondary schools had to spend more time and energy than those in grammar schools on attendance records, links with outside agencies and on paperwork in connection with pupils with special educational needs and 'other pupil problems'. Although there was substantial agreement among teachers at different levels of the school hierarchy about the demands of most tasks, significantly more of the members of the senior management teams than of other teachers in primary schools had

responsibility for the induction of new teachers, while unpromoted teachers in post-primary schools were significantly less involved in 'target setting/school improvement'. In the primary sector teachers in maintained schools rated 8 out of 21 items as significantly more demanding or time-consuming than did teachers in controlled primary schools.

9. In reply to open-ended items inviting comment on workloads, many respondents made the point that it was more the total amount of administration rather than any individual tasks which was burdensome. A number of teaching principals from both primary and nursery schools found their dual role increasingly difficult. It will be observed that a number of findings in the present survey are similar to those in the recent surveys by teacher unions (paragraphs 2 and 3).

Changes in Demands since the Circular

10. In all four school sectors, respondents usually felt that the demands of the individual tasks had remained at much the same level as before the Circular, or else had increased. Only for three items in special schools did more than 10% of any group of respondents think there had been a diminution. The nursery school principals appeared to feel the increased pressures most acutely; at least 50% judged that the demands of 9 of the 20 items on their checklist had increased - notably 83% judged that 'pupils admissions' had increased. Across the four sectors, 'pupils with special educational needs' and 'target setting/school improvement' were the areas where the paperwork was most often thought to have increased.

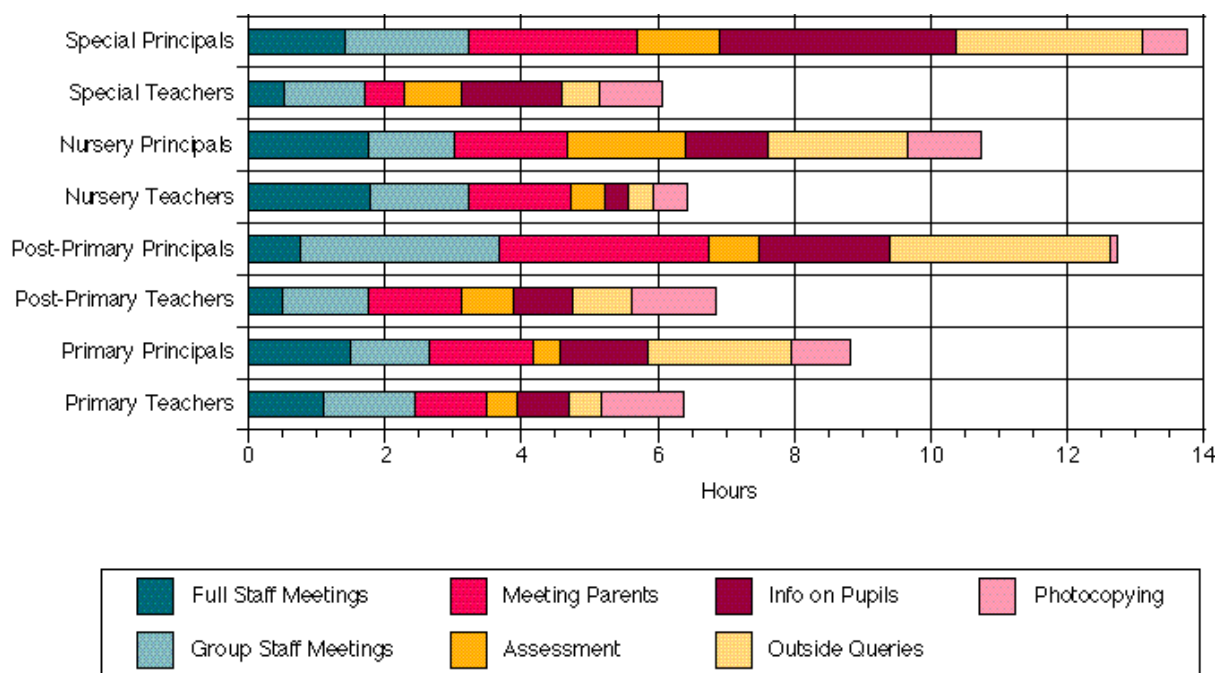
Time on Administrative Tasks

11. Estimates of the amount of time spent the previous week on each of seven non-teaching tasks revealed that:

- ◆ Respondents in all four sectors averaged at least 1.7 hours in staff meetings with nursery teachers and principals of post-primary, nursery and special schools averaging over 3 hours. Some of this time would, however, have been spent in curriculum planning rather than in more bureaucratic tasks.

- ◆ The ratio of time in full staff meetings and in group meetings varied across the sectors. Post-primary staff spent the highest ratio of time in group meetings, which would have included departmental meetings.

Figure 2: Time spent the Previous Week on Seven Non-teaching Tasks



- ◆ In all four sectors principals spent considerably longer than teachers in dealing with outside queries, averaging respectively about 2½ hours and 45 minutes.
- ◆ Principals of special schools had spent the most time supplying information on individual pupils (3½ hours) and also appeared to meet personally many of the parents who visited the school (nearly 2½ hours), although the post-primary principals had spent longer still with parents the previous week (just over 3 hours). Teachers in special schools had spent the least time with parents (about 35 minutes).
- ◆ Principals of nursery schools had spent the longest time completing records and other administrative aspects of assessment (nearly 1¾ hours), followed by principals of special schools (just under 1¼ hours).
- ◆ Teachers generally averaged over an hour on photocopying. Apart from heads of post-primary schools, principals too might have spent considerable time on this chore.

12. Principals' and teachers' administrative workloads would, of course, include many tasks, and especially seasonal tasks, other than the seven identified here.

Sources of Administrative Workload

13. The earlier surveys by Teacher Unions in Northern Ireland had suggested that teachers usually blamed their principals or their schools generally for their workloads while principals blamed such outside administrative agencies as the Department of Education, the Education and Library Boards (ELBs), the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). In the present survey, however, the main source of administrative workload for all groups of principals and teachers, with the exception of primary school teachers (for whom it was a close second) was reckoned to be the school itself.

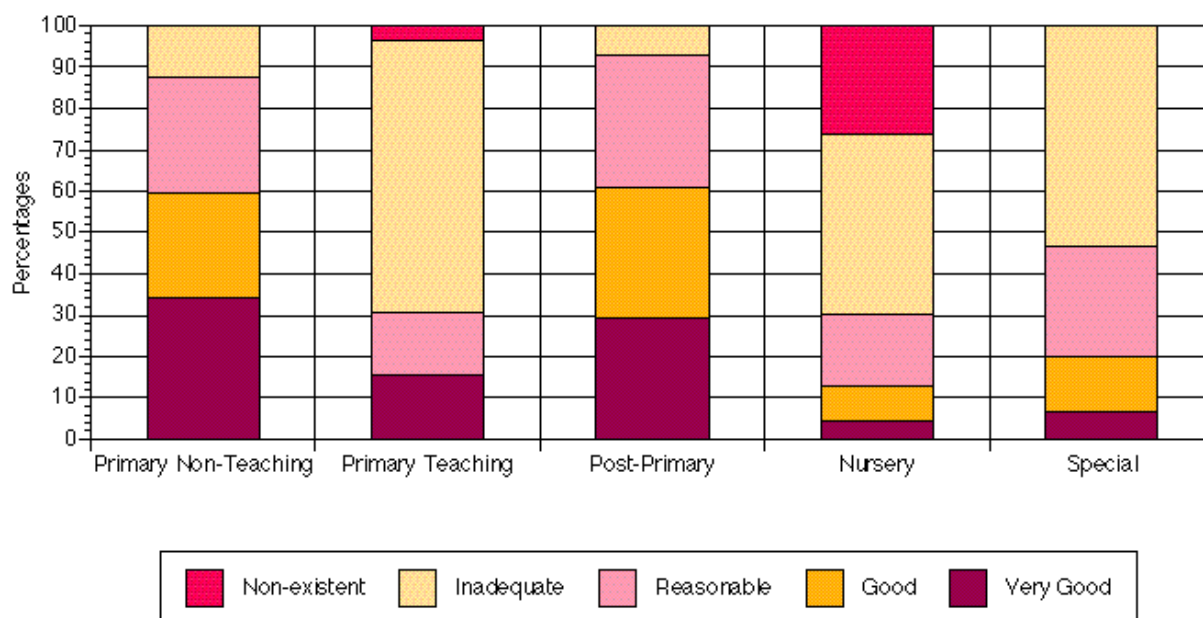
14. The following differences were observed among groups of respondents:

- ◆ In primary, post-primary and special schools the principals reported significantly heavier workloads from the ELBs than did the teachers. Post-primary principals also gave higher ratings than their colleagues to demands arising from the Department of Education and CCMS. (There were insufficient data from nursery school teachers for such comparisons).
- ◆ Both principals and teachers in primary schools rated the workload emanating from CCEA as greater than did their opposite numbers in other types of schools.
- ◆ Respondents from post-primary schools gave generally lower ratings to demands from outside agencies, especially those from the ELBs, than did respondents elsewhere.
- ◆ In comparison with their opposite numbers in controlled schools, teachers in maintained primary schools gave significantly higher mean ratings to the demands from CCEA and from their own schools, while those in maintained secondary high schools gave higher ratings to the demands from the Department of Education.

Secretarial Support in Schools

15. Approximately 60% of both the principals of post-primary schools and the non-teaching principals of primary schools rated their secretarial provision as either 'very good' or 'good'; respectively only 7% and 13% of these groups of principals rated secretarial provision in their schools as 'inadequate', the remainder judging it to be 'reasonable'. The principals of nursery and special schools and the teaching principals of primary schools thought themselves less fortunate. Respectively only 13%, 20% and 15% of these groups thought their provision 'very good' or 'good', while respectively 70%, 53% and 69% judged it to be 'inadequate' or 'non-existent'.

Figure 3: Principals' Ratings of Secretarial Support



16. Many principals added a note explaining that although their secretaries were competent – often highly so – and in some cases worked longer than their contract stipulated, their school budgets did not allow them to employ as much secretarial assistance as the school required. Such principals could be understandably dismissive of recommendations in Circular 1998/33 about delegating more responsibility to support staff.

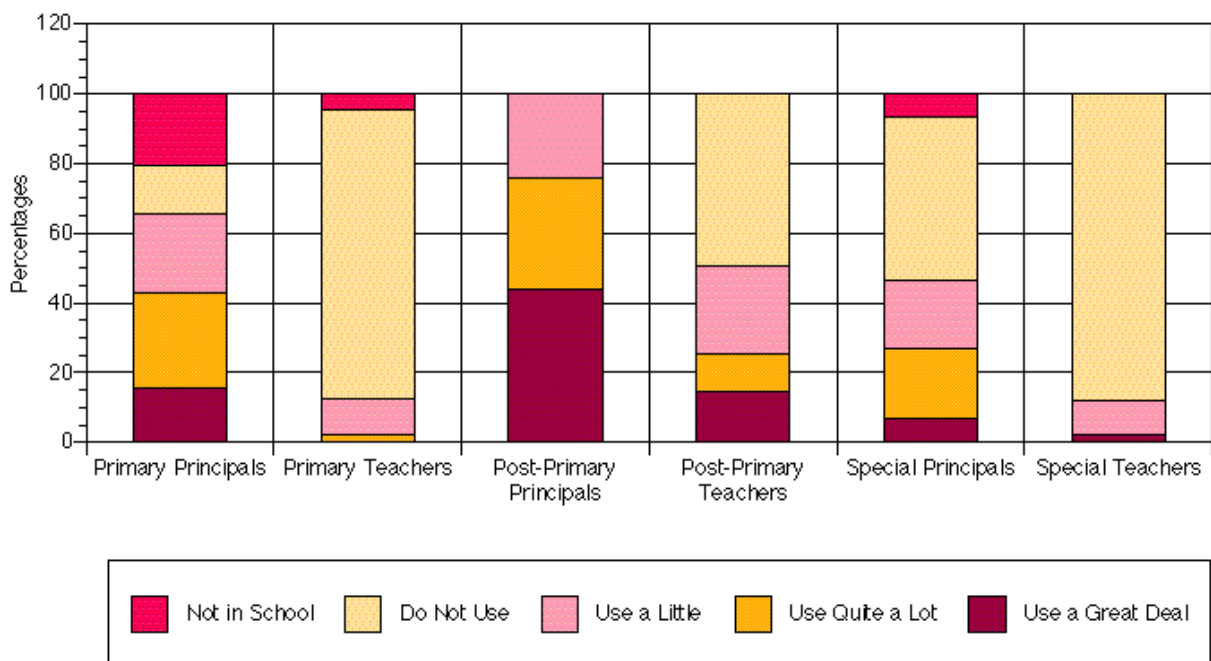
17. From the teachers' replies it was apparent that, although they too usually thought highly of the secretarial staff, many of them had little or no access to their services. This led nearly 30% of the teachers in post-primary schools to rate the school's secretarial provision as less than adequate, including four members of middle management who recorded it as 'non-existent', despite the high rating of

such provision by the principals. Such complaints from post-primary teachers came more than twice as often from the maintained as from controlled schools.

Use of the CLASS System

18. At the time of the survey CLASS had not been installed in nursery schools nor in the smallest primary and special schools. Although about three-quarters of the post-primary principals and two-thirds of the non-teaching primary principals were making substantial use of the CLASS system (ie reporting using it either 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal') only a quarter of the principals of special schools and an even smaller proportion of the teaching principals of primary schools which had CLASS installed were making substantial use of the CLASS system. Only between 10% and 15% of the teachers in primary and special schools were making any use of the system and it was very rare for a teacher from either of these sectors to report using it more than 'a little'. By contrast, about half the teachers from post-primary schools used at least one CLASS module and about a quarter recorded substantial use; among post-primary teachers in the senior management team nearly three-quarters used CLASS and just over half made substantial use of it.

Figure 4: Use of the CLASS System



19. In primary schools the most helpful CLASS modules were found to be FMS, Attendance and STAR but the SENCO module was more often singled out for

adverse criticism. In post-primary schools the MIDAS module was the most highly regarded, followed by Attendance, Examinations, NOVA-T, STAR and FMS and no individual module was criticised by more than five respondents. In the special school sector no individual module emerged as either particularly helpful or unhelpful.

Impact of Circular 1998/33

20. All principals in post-primary and special schools and approximately 90% in primary and nursery schools were previously aware of Circular 1998/33. However, only 30.5% of the teachers in primary schools, 47.5% in post-primary schools and 58.1% in special schools, though all but one of the small group of teachers from nursery schools, could recall the Circular arriving in their school. Another 44 (9.5%) teachers, mainly in primary and post-primary schools, knew of the Circular through recent attention in the media or by the teacher unions. In the primary sector, though not in other sectors, nearly twice as many teachers in maintained as in controlled schools had some previous awareness of the Circular (58% vs. 31%).

21. Only some 20% of the principals of primary and nursery schools reported that there had been changes in their schools resulting directly from Circular 1998/33, as compared with 66% of the principals of post-primary schools and 60% in special schools. Fewer teachers reported such changes: about 32% in post-primary and special schools and only 5% in primary schools.

22. In many cases, however, – though not appreciably so in nursery schools – the numbers identifying *any* recent administrative change aimed at easing the administrative burden were considerably higher: 66% of principals and 24% of teachers in primary schools and 88% of the principals and 51% of the teachers in post-primary schools. Many changes had therefore been made which were not attributed to Circular 1998/33. Some respondents indicated that at the time of its publication their schools were already doing most of what the Circular recommended and official advice of this kind is usually built on existing best practice.

Administrative Changes in Schools

23. The two most frequently mentioned types of change were a reduction in the number of staff meetings and reduced frequency of sending reports on pupils home to parents.

24. Other changes that recurred in a number of answers included:
- ◆ greater efficiency in the running of staff meetings, affecting targeting, preliminary papers, time-keeping or the production of minutes;
 - ◆ the appointment of more secretarial or administrative staff in schools that could afford them;
 - ◆ more delegation of non-teaching tasks to secretarial and occasionally to teachers (including nursery school teachers), senior pupils and work placement students;
 - ◆ greater use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), including the adoption of further CLASS modules, computerised pupil records or Records of Achievement and the development of pro formas for requisitions and planning notes for teaching;
 - ◆ in a few schools general changes were described, such as reconsideration of staff priorities, 'less record keeping' or a cutting down of the paperwork demanded of teachers.

Recommendations from Schools

25. The following were the most frequent types of answer in reply to a questionnaire item on what still needed to be done to reduce the 'bureaucratic burden' on teachers.

- ◆ ***More support staff in schools:*** Whereas respondents in primary, nursery and special schools asked for more secretarial help, those in post-primary schools more frequently asked for administrative staff, such as a Bursar.
- ◆ ***Allocated time for teachers' administrative duties:*** There were requests that 'administrative duties' should appear on the weekly time-table and also for occasional exceptional closures for administrative purposes. Some nursery principals wanted regular 'principal release' on a basis similar to that for teaching principals in primary schools.
- ◆ ***Increased use of ICT:*** Two types of requests in this area were, firstly, for more training and, secondly, for more sharing of pro formas among schools.

- ◆ *Less paperwork in general:* There should be a questioning of the amount of documentation sent routinely to schools and of some of the paperwork generated by the school itself.
- ◆ *Reduced paperwork in connection with the Code of Practice for pupils with special educational needs:* There were requests, mainly from primary and special schools that this be simplified and made altogether more manageable.
- ◆ *Reduced paperwork for Inspections:* The preliminary paperwork which schools were expected to produce before inspections was regarded not only as excessively time-consuming but often as creating a false impression of what the school was really like.
- ◆ *Trust teachers:* Many of the requests asked Government, either explicitly or implicitly to trust teachers more and not to impose so many accountability and recording exercises upon them.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

26. Questionnaires for the postal survey were designed after consultations with principals and teachers in primary, grammar, other secondary, nursery and special schools. There were also consultations with representatives or spokespersons from CCEA, teacher unions and Education and Library Boards. There were slightly different versions of the questionnaire for the four main school sectors: primary, post-primary, nursery and special education.

27. In order to try to ensure a sample of about 200 schools and in the light of the experience of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) that only about half the schools in an approach sample were likely to agree to participate in a postal survey, invitations were sent to all post-primary and special schools, half the nursery schools and a two-in-seven sample of primary schools. Schools in which the principal had been appointed after January 1998 were not included in the invitation since it might sometimes be hard to distinguish the effects of the Circular from those of the new regime. Efforts were also made to try to ensure an adequate number of responses from members of senior and middle management and of unpromoted teachers as well as from principals. In the event the main shortfall was in the post-primary sector where only about a quarter of the schools approached agreed to take part.

28. A total of 614 useable questionnaires was eventually returned. There were 213 from primary schools (59 from principals and 154 from teachers) and 302 from post-primary schools (41 from principals, 57 from other members of senior management, 115 from middle management and 89 from unpromoted teachers). From the special school sector – where 34 schools were approached and half the 58 replies were from schools for pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) and a third from schools for pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD) – came 15 replies from principals, 16 from other senior management and 27 from other teachers. From the 35 nursery schools approached which were believed to have had a principal in post since January 1998 came 24 questionnaires from principals (68.6%) but only 7 from teachers and another 10 from nursery assistants. The total number of nursery school teachers in the 35 schools was unknown but unlikely to be below 30. Though just over a third (35.5%) of the 614 replies were filled in anonymously, without identifying the school by name, all respondents indicated the nature of their post and almost all gave background details of the type and size of their school and its form of management.

THE PROJECT

29. The project was commissioned by the Department of Education from the Graduate School of Education of the Queen's University of Belfast. The cost of the project was £19,100.

THE FULL REPORT

30. The full report, entitled "Reducing The Bureaucratic Burden on Schools", by Patrick Walsh and Anne E Sutherland, is available from the Department of Education, price £5¹.

This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.

¹ Each educational establishment and library is entitled to one free copy

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