We asked 201 principals (headteachers) of small rural schools (with 105 pupils enrolled in 2019/20 or 2020/21) in Northern Ireland to complete an online survey between April and July 2021, and 91 took part (86 completed responses).

90 principals identified up to 5 main challenges for their schools.

- Financial pressures and lack of funding: 52%
- Staff’s intense workloads: 80%
- Increasing number of pupils with SEN: 52%
- Declining pupil numbers: 31%
- Threat of potential closure: 24%
- Lack of staff opportunities for professional development: 48%

88 principals rated their job satisfaction on a scale of 1-5:

- Unsatisfied: 1-2
- Satisfied: 4-5

62% of principals were satisfied with their job as principals.

88 principals identified their school as one of the main institutions of the community it serves.

At the heart of the community?

- Our school is the heart of the rural community. Our families often have no other outlet or community-based organisation to support them. … We offer support for parents and work closely with community groups to offer social events.

89 principals rated parents’/families’ involvement with the school (before the pandemic started) on a scale of 1-5:

- Not involved: 1-2
- Involved: 4-5

¾ of respondents felt that most parents and families were involved with the school.

% of respondents that most parents and families were involved with the school.

- 75% of 84 schools had recently participated in shared education programmes and further 3 schools had participated in the past.

There is now so much paperwork and accountability not just educationally but from a health and safety and financial perspective that I feel the role of a teaching principal is no longer feasible.

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