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Sustaining pastoral care in post-primary schools: organisational practices, challenges, and support needs

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ABSTRACT

Care is widely recognised as an important aspect of school life, yet there is little empirical research examining how care is understood and enacted in post-primary (secondary) schools at an organisational level. This paper examines how care is organised, experienced, supported, and constrained within the Education and Training Board (ETB) post-primary sector in Ireland, where care is officially recognised as a core value. Focusing on leadership at the whole-school level, the study aims to explore the gap between care as an espoused ethos or policy aspiration and care as an enacted organisational practice. A sector wide survey was used to collect quantitative data which measured perceptions of care provision and qualitative data examining challenges in the provision of care and the supports required across the sector. Findings indicate that care is experienced through a range of organisational practices, including leadership approaches and structures for pastoral care. This study makes visible the labour through which care is sustained in practice and acknowledges that it is time-consuming, emotionally demanding and unevenly resourced. Participants identified systemic and resource-related challenges that impact the consistent enactment of care across the sector. The study contributes to understanding of care as an organisational construct and highlights implications for educational leadership.

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Pastoral care; care work;
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1. Introduction

Schools are widely described as caring communities, yet the enactment of care in everyday practice is shaped not only by interpersonal relationships but by leadership practices and organisational conditions (Rogers & Kelly, 2025). How a young person feels at school – whether they feel safe, noticed, or supported – has a direct bearing on their engagement, learning and development. These relationships are therefore not peripheral to schooling but central to how schools function as organisations, and they remain central to contemporary debates about wellbeing and inclusion across Europe and internationally.

Care theorists have played an important role in shaping how care is understood within education. Noddings' work (1984, 2002, 2013) positions care as a relational and reciprocal

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encounter, grounded in openness, attentiveness, and responsiveness. In this view, caring is not a programme or technique but a moral orientation enacted through everyday interactions and sustained relationships.

The conditions within which schools now operate complicate the enactment of care as a lived practice. Across Europe and Ireland, school leaders are responding to rising concerns about student mental health, increased diversity, intensified safeguarding responsibilities, and persistent pressures related to curriculum, assessment, and accountability (Hickey et al., 2024). These demands are frequently experienced alongside limited time, staffing shortages, and administrative overload and can inhibit compassionate behaviour (Al-Ghabban, 2018).

This paper examines how care is organised, experienced, supported, and constrained within the Education and Training Board (ETB) post-primary (secondary) sector in Ireland. The study aims to explore the gap between care as an espoused ethos or policy aspiration and care as an enacted organisational practice. Drawing on empirical evidence from a sector-wide survey completed by school leaders, the paper examines how care is structured within schools and identifies what leaders report needing in order to sustain care for students.

2. Conceptualising care in schools: relational and structural

2.1. Care as a relational ethic

Much of the contemporary discussion about care in education is grounded in the work of Nel Noddings. For Noddings (1984, 2002, 2013), care is first and foremost a relational ethic. It emerges in concrete encounters between a *one-caring* and a *cared-for*, where the carer is attentive to the other's needs, responds thoughtfully, and remains open to how their care is received. This involves what she terms receptivity, responsiveness, and reciprocity: the educator listens, tries to understand, acts in the best interests of the student, and the student, in turn, experiences and recognises that care.

In this view, care is not an 'add-on' to teaching; it is part of the moral core of educational practice. Gordon, Benner and Noddings (1996, as cited in Moen et al., 2020) describe care as a set of relational practices that foster recognition, growth, protection, empowerment and community. Everyday interactions are therefore not incidental. They are the ordinary means through which students come to feel known, safe, and valued in school.

Jackson (2025) returns to these ideas to clarify what is at stake in care ethics in contemporary education. She emphasises that caring, in this tradition, is an activity and a social practice, not simply a personal trait or a generalised 'virtue'. It is situated and limited: individuals cannot care equally for everyone, and obligations arise within particular relationships and contexts. This focus on concrete relationships and lived encounters is significant in a policy environment that often favours abstraction, standardisation and universal principles. Jackson's argument is that if we lose sight of this relational grounding, the language of care can easily be stretched to fit agendas that have little to do with Noddings' original concerns.

Any serious account of care in schools must begin with how students experience their relationships with teachers and other adults. Care is present when students

sense that staff are genuinely interested in their wellbeing, when they are listened to, and when responses to their difficulties are thoughtful and consistent. On the other hand, when students experience interactions as rushed, transactional, or purely rule-driven, the ethical promise of care is weakened, even where caring intentions are present.

2.2. Care as culture, belonging and inclusion

Relational care is not only shaped by individual dispositions; it is also embedded in the wider culture of the school. Research on inclusive education and school climate shows that when students experience acceptance and belonging, they engage more deeply in learning and develop more positively, socially and emotionally (Allen et al., 2018; Korpershoek et al., 2020). In caring school cultures, students' identities, backgrounds and stories are acknowledged rather than ignored, and difference is treated as a normal feature of the community rather than a problem to be managed. In this sense, care operates through shared values, expectations, and everyday practices that signal who is seen and heard, and who feels that school is 'for them.'

On the one hand, research on belonging and inclusion demonstrates that caring cultures matter for students' learning and development. On the other hand, critical work on care ethics highlights that care is vulnerable to being co-opted: it can function to soften or obscure the impact of policies and practices that are not themselves organised around care (Gillies, 2011; Vaittinen, 2022). This vulnerability is not incidental. Building on these critiques, Lynch et al. (2009) and Lynch (2021) argues that the devaluation of care is structurally produced: care is historically feminised, taken-for-granted, and treated as a natural disposition rather than a form of skilled labour. Emotional support, listening, and relational attunement are essential to how schools function, yet they often remain invisible within policy, staffing, and time allocation. Schools depend heavily on teachers' goodwill; yet goodwill is not a system.

The difficulty teachers face in enacting sustained relational care is not merely a problem of individual capacity, but of the institutional misrecognition of affective labour. When the emotional and relational dimensions of schooling are systematically under-resourced, care becomes something schools ask for but do not structurally support. Care in schools is therefore conceptualised as both relational and structural. It encompasses both everyday encounters between staff and students and the organisational conditions that enable or constrain them. This dual framing provides a lens through which to interpret the findings from ETB post-primary schools.

2.3. Care as organisational work in schools

Joan Tronto's political ethics of care offers an important way of understanding this shift from goodwill to infrastructure. For Tronto (2013), care is not a private virtue but a democratic practice that unfolds across five interconnected phases: noticing that someone has a need, assuming responsibility for responding, having the competence and resources to act effectively, evaluating whether the response genuinely meets the need, and embedding care within relations of solidarity and shared purpose. In this view, caring is organisational work. It requires pastoral care structures that allow people not only to

recognise needs but to act on them in sustained, competent, and collectively accountable ways.

Schools can only 'care' in a meaningful sense when they systematically notice students' needs, assign responsibility clearly, ensure staff have the time and expertise to respond, and review whether those responses are effective. Without protected time for meetings, coordinated teams, clarity of roles, or mechanisms for follow-up, care remains uneven, dependent on who happens to be available, who is willing to stretch their limits, and who can absorb the additional pressures. When care is structurally unsupported (Tronto, 2013) then, it often becomes individually absorbed as Lynch (2021) explains. From a school leadership perspective, these dynamics position school leaders as mediators between caring values and organisational capacity. School leaders are required to not only promote an ethos of care but to develop and manage the pastoral care structures through which care is enacted. This work requires administrative decision-making including time-tabling, role allocation, budgeting and the development of formal care structures, policies and processes. These ideas are echoed by Tamir and Ganon-Shilon (2021) who recognise a 'values-based' and 'caring culture' as central to schools that succeed in 'streaming resources to processes that they consider important for the school as well as in translating the resources in terms of school ethos' (p. 661).

This dynamic is reinforced in Irish and international policy frameworks. The Irish Department of Education's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (Department of Education, 2018) requires schools to adopt a whole-school approach built on coordinated structures, planning, and evaluation. International frameworks – from the *WHO & UNESCO Health-Promoting Schools Global Standards* (World Health Organization & UNESCO [WHO], 2021) to OECD analyses of curriculum, wellbeing, and system design (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020) and resourcing for student support (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024) – similarly emphasise system coherence, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Yet this ideal falters in practice. Even where attentiveness to students' needs is strong, responsibility may be diffuse, competence stretched by workload and training constraints, and responsiveness inconsistent due to fragmented systems that rely on informal communication. Comparative education research highlights time pressure, administrative overload, and role ambiguity as consistent barriers to effective student support (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2019, 2023; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021).

Lynch's analysis of affective inequality (Lynch et al., 2009) provides a useful parallel: the relational labour that sustains school life is frequently undervalued and taken for granted. When schools rely on staff 'going the extra mile,' they appear caring, but they do so in ways that are precarious, emotionally expensive, and vulnerable to burnout and turnover. These pressures intensify in contexts involving students with additional or complex needs. Inclusive education frameworks require attentiveness, coordination, and specialist competence at levels that informal or overstretched systems cannot reliably sustain. Studies consistently show that many children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities continue to experience elevated levels of anxiety, behavioural dysregulation, and social-emotional vulnerability, with mismatches between need and available support persisting well beyond the acute phase of the pandemic (Ashworth et al., 2023; Castle et al., 2024; Morgül et al., 2022). Review evidence further highlights how

interruptions to specialist services, therapy provision, and structured routines during COVID-19 had lasting negative effects, with schools attempting to compensate for lost support in the absence of consistent resourcing or staffing (Courrèges et al., 2023; Mullen et al., 2024). COVID-19 did not create the gap between ethos and infrastructure, but it widened it, exposing how heavily inclusive care depends on the elasticity of teachers' time and emotional labour (Hanley, 2017; Hochschild, 1983). A whole-school approach to care, therefore, is not only a matter of ethos; it is a matter of architecture.

3. Context: care in the Irish Education and Training Board post-primary sector

In Ireland, ETBs are statutory bodies responsible for the governance of 252 public post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, 252 (Network, 2025). Care occupies a particularly prominent place within the ETB sector's articulation of school ethos. The ETB Ethos Quality Framework (O'Brien, 2021) sets out a series of standards and statements of effective practice that emphasise care, respect, equality and community as foundational principles of ETB education. Within this framework, care is presented not simply as a matter of interpersonal goodwill, but as a whole-school responsibility that should be visible in policies, leadership practices, student support structures and relationships across the school community. Schools are expected to demonstrate care through safeguarding procedures, inclusive practices, attention to wellbeing and the provision of support for students with diverse needs.

At the same time, ETB schools operate within the broader regulatory and accountability environment of Irish post-primary education. They are subject to national curriculum requirements, state examinations, inspection by the Department of Education, and statutory obligations relating to child protection, anti-bullying and health and safety (Department of Education, 2017). These requirements shape how care is organised in practice, often privileging forms of care that are procedurally defined, auditable and externally accountable. Safeguarding, risk management and compliance with statutory policy are therefore highly visible dimensions of care within schools, supported by clear guidance and formal oversight, a pattern that reflects wider critiques of the governance of care in education systems (Gillies, 2011).

Alongside these regulatory demands, ETB schools are also responding to significant social and educational change. Irish post-primary schools have experienced rising levels of student diversity, increased awareness of mental health and wellbeing needs, and growing expectations that schools will act as key sites of support for children and young people facing complex social, emotional and familial challenges. These developments have intensified the care-related responsibilities of schools, extending them beyond traditional academic instruction into areas of wellbeing, inclusion and social support (Department of Education, 2025; O'Brien et al., 2024).

Importantly, while care is rhetorically embedded within the ETB ethos framework, the organisational conditions under which care is enacted vary considerably across schools. Differences in school size, staffing profiles, access to specialist personnel, physical infrastructure and local service provision shape schools' capacity to translate ethical commitments into sustained practice. Care in this context is therefore not only a moral

orientation, but an organisational achievement, dependent on time, coordination, professional expertise and access to external support.

Understanding care in ETB post-primary schools therefore requires attention to both institutional structures and everyday practices. It involves examining how care is formalised through governance and policy, how it is enacted through teaching, support and relationships, and how it is sustained – or strained – under contemporary organisational pressures. This study is situated within this context, exploring how school leaders describe the organisation, experience and limits of care within the Irish ETB post-primary sector.

4. Methods

This paper draws on data from a national survey on ethos in ETB schools, commissioned by Education and Training Board Ireland (ETBI) and conducted by Dublin City University (DCU). Ethical approval for the study was granted by DCU Research Ethics Committee. A survey design was selected in order to examine how care is structured, supported and constrained across the post-primary ETB sector at a systems-wide level. A survey facilitates the collection of data that maps patterns and shared leadership experiences, pressures and needs across the sector (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The study employed a mixed methods survey design, comprising quantitative Likert-type scale with 23 items measuring perceptions of care, followed by open-ended questions exploring challenges in the provision of care and participant's views on how ETBI can support care in schools going forward. The validity of the scale was addressed through a multi-stage instrument development process. Content validity was established through an extensive review of literature on care in schools, ensuring that the survey items reflected key dimensions of care identified in previous research. In addition, the development of items was informed by the *Standards and Statements of Effective Practice for Ethos in ETB Schools* (O'Brien, 2021) within which care is identified as a core dimension of school ethos, alongside respect, equality and community. This provides contextual grounding for the construct of care as operationalised for this study. To further support face and content validity, the draft survey was reviewed by ETBI staff who provided feedback on the clarity, relevance and appropriateness of the wording. This approach reflects an understanding of care as both a theoretical construct and a lived organisational practice.

The questionnaire was distributed to all ETB post-primary schools and completed online via the Qualtrics platform. Responses were submitted by school Ethos Leadership Teams, including positional leaders such as the school principal and deputy principal/s, providing a leadership-level perspective on how care is organised and enacted within schools. In total, 162 of 253 ETB post-primary schools participated, representing a response rate of 64%. Schools were allocated identification codes S1-S162 to ensure anonymity. This breadth of participation provides a robust basis for examining patterns in how care is structured, supported and constrained across the ETB post-primary sector.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS. As the study was exploratory in nature, analysis focused on descriptive statistics, which were used to summarise patterns in the responses to the care scale. Findings are presented thematically under key areas of organisational practice. Qualitative data generated through open-ended survey questions were analysed using thematic analysis following the Braun and Clarke (2022) six-step approach. Responses were coded in NVivo, with codes subsequently reviewed, refined

and organised into themes relating to challenges in the provision of care and opportunities for organisational support. In the presentation of findings, the figures summarise the theme of each survey item, however for more detail the survey questions are outlined in Appendix A.

5. Findings: care as governance, practice and constraint in ETB schools

5.1. Care as governance: safeguarding, risk and formal responsibility

Across ETB post-primary schools, the strongest consensus on care is evident in relation to safeguarding and protection. Almost all schools report that child protection and anti-bullying policies are effectively implemented, that procedures are in place to identify students at risk, and that schools provide a caring environment which promotes student welfare (Figure 1). Very high levels of agreement are also reported for critical incident policies and the establishment of Student Support Teams (multidisciplinary teams responsible for coordinating student care and support) in line with national guidance. These findings indicate that ETB schools have highly institutionalised systems of care in place. Care in this respect is organised through formal policy frameworks, clearly defined procedures and designated pastoral care structures for managing risk and responding to harm – forms of care that are most clearly regulated, mandated and externally accountable. The strength of agreement suggests that care as governance is firmly embedded and comparatively insulated from local organisational variation.

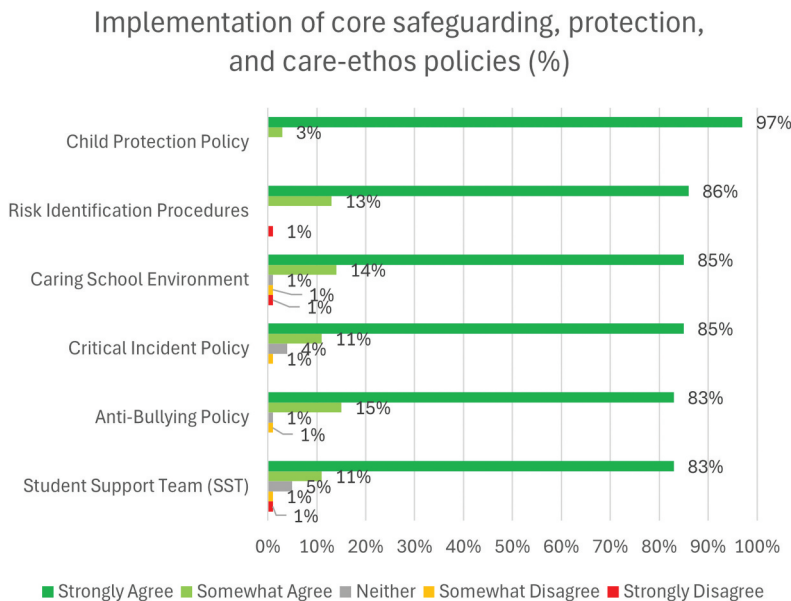


Figure 1. Levels of agreement with core safeguarding, protection and caring environment practices in ETB post-primary schools.

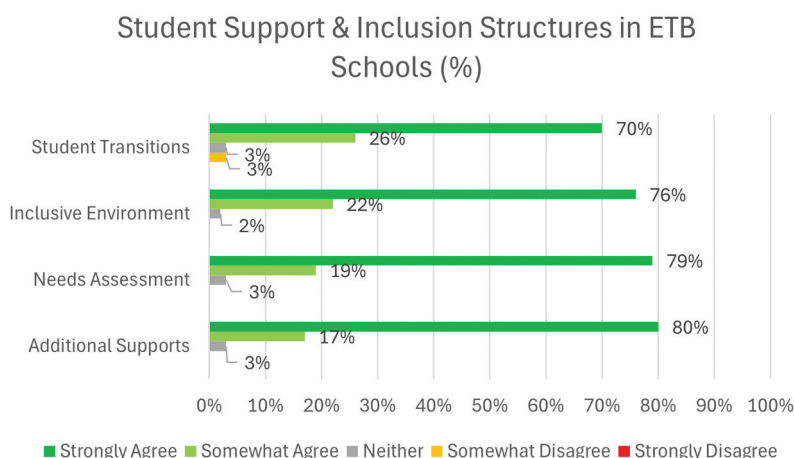


Figure 2. Levels of agreement with student support, inclusion and needs assessment structures in ETB post-primary schools.

5.2. Care as everyday developmental work

5.2.1 Supporting diverse needs through school-based systems

Moving beyond formal safeguarding arrangements, [Figure 2](#) shows how care is organised through everyday school practices: providing additional supports, assessing student need, promoting inclusion, and managing key transition points. Overall agreement remains high, with most schools reporting that these systems are in place. However, the pattern of responses differs from that observed for safeguarding. While schools broadly agree that such practices exist, they are less likely to express *strong* agreement than they are in relation to protection and compliance.

This suggests not an absence of care, but a more qualified confidence in how securely and consistently these forms of support can be sustained. Unlike safeguarding, which is tightly regulated and procedurally defined, these aspects of care depend more on local organisational capacity and ongoing coordination. Care here is not activated through compliance, but maintained through everyday work over time. As a result, it appears more variable and more exposed to the practical conditions under which schools operate.

5.2.2 Care as pedagogy, recognition and wellbeing

This section examines forms of care enacted through everyday teaching and relationships. It focuses on wellbeing learning, social and emotional development, recognition of student achievement, engagement with parents and guardians, and the implementation of wellbeing policy at a whole-school level. Across ETB post-primary schools, agreement is generally high that care is being actively enacted through classroom practices and ongoing relational work with students ([Figure 3](#)). Schools report that wellbeing learning is embedded in everyday practice, that students are supported to develop social and emotional competencies, and that a broad range of student achievement is acknowledged. However, while most schools report that wellbeing work is taking place, fewer express strong confidence that it is coherently organised at policy level. This points to a gap between care as lived practice and care as a formal organisational framework.

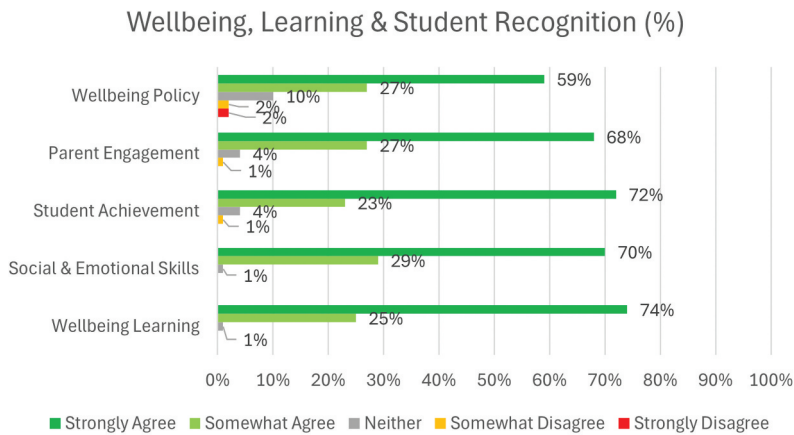


Figure 3. Levels of agreement with wellbeing, learning and student recognition practices in ETB post-primary schools.

A similar pattern is evident in relation to engagement with parents and guardians. Although most schools report active engagement, agreement levels are lower than for in-school practices, suggesting that care becomes more variable where it depends on coordination beyond the classroom.

5.3. The hidden labour of care

Alongside the strong formalisation of safeguarding and the widespread enactment of everyday developmental care, school leaders' qualitative responses reveal a less visible but critical dimension of care: the labour required to make caring systems work under constrained conditions. This labour might not be primarily organisationally protected, but it is carried through time-intensive coordination, emotional work and reliance on professional goodwill.

As shown in Table 1, lack of time was by far the most frequently cited constraint on the provision of care, identified by 63 schools. This was followed by limited resources (33), the impact of COVID-19 (27), high or increasing levels of student need (24), lack of staff or personnel (22), and restricted access to external support (19). Other references to lack of

Table 1. Reported constraints on the provision of care in ETB post-primary schools (qualitative responses).

Reported constraint	Number of schools (n)
Lack of time	63
Limited resources	33
Impact of COVID-19	27
High or increasing levels of student need	24
Lack of staff or personnel	22
Limited access to external supports	19
Lack of training	12
Lack of support for staff	9
Emotional workload, morale and burnout	9

training, limited support for staff, and emotional workload, morale and exhaustion further point to the pressures under which care is sustained.

Importantly, when time was mentioned, leaders linked it to the practical work through which care is enacted: meetings, planning, coordination, collaboration and follow-up with students experiencing difficulty. Several schools described themselves as '*time poor*,' with one identifying time as the '*greatest challenge*' facing leadership in caring for the school community:

Our Student Support Team have working lunches to review students who may be vulnerable or communicate after school hours as it is not possible to have scheduled meetings with busy timetables, therefore we rely on the goodwill of our team to meet when they can. (S26)

Here, care is displaced beyond formally timetabled pastoral care structures and sustained through informal arrangements. Coordination occurs at lunch or after school, and the functioning of support systems depends on discretionary effort rather than protected organisational time. This reliance on goodwill is closely bound up with emotional labour. Leaders referred to the cumulative burden of responding to distress, crisis and complex need, often without access to supervision or specialist support.

Wellbeing for all is a core priority however we are time poor ... The wellbeing of senior management can fade into the background as we strive to care for those in our care. (S6)

The lack of time to provide care is compounded by the lack of resources, which included a lack of: guidance counsellors (S13, S40, S101), special needs assistants (S35, S52, S80, S101, S126), meeting rooms (S31, S65, S80), access to psychological services (S28, S47, S70, S85, S86), parental engagement (S20, S23, S28, S34, S86).

These shortages were described in the context of increasing levels of anxiety among students and staff (S37, S55, S58, S93, S154) in addition to increasing challenges arising from students who require higher levels of care and more specialised expertise than are currently available within existing staff teams. In this regard schools highlighted students with diverse linguistic, cultural and migration profiles (S126, S162), adverse childhood experiences (S162), mental health issues (S16, S25, S30, S35, S55, S75, S94), cyberbullying and social media-related behavioural and wellbeing concerns (S25, S34, S132).

5.4. From goodwill to infrastructure: what schools say they need

The constraints described in the previous section are reflected clearly in school leaders' accounts of what is required to sustain care into the future. When asked how care could be better supported, schools did not emphasise the need for new values, additional policies or stronger commitment. Instead, responses consistently focused on the material, organisational and professional conditions necessary to support the care work that is already taking place.

As summarised in Table 2 below, the most frequently cited need was additional training and professional development, identified by 39 schools. This was closely followed by requests for more staff or personnel (32), more protected time (24), increased funding (22), and additional resources (21). Schools also highlighted the need for greater access to guidance counselling, psychological assessment and

Table 2. Reported supports needed for the provision of care in ETB post-primary schools (qualitative responses).

Reported Support needed	Number of schools (n)
Training	39
More staff or personnel	32
More time	24
Funding or financial support	22
More resources	21
More counsellors or guidance counsellors	13
More targeted supports or meeting student needs	10
Guidelines, advice, strategies and support with coordination	10

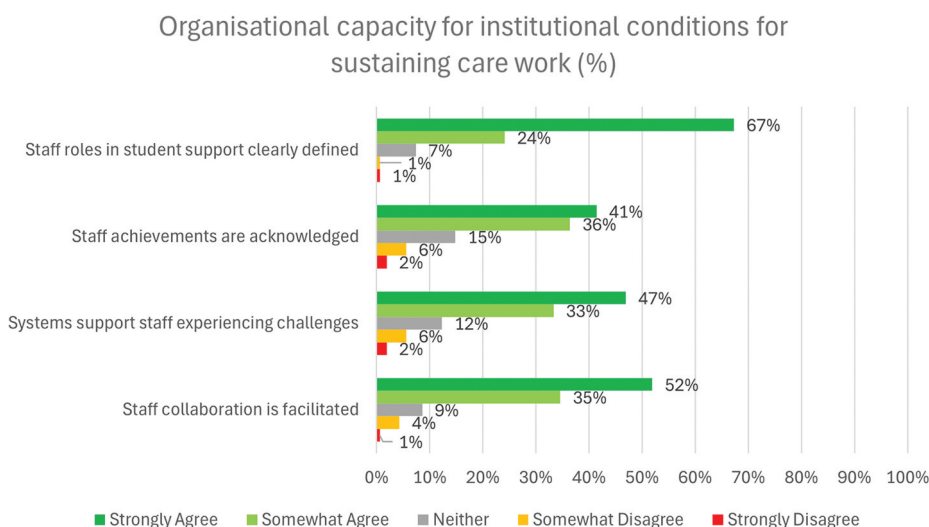


Figure 4. Levels of agreement with organisational conditions supporting care work in ETB post-primary schools.

external specialist services, alongside clearer coordination and support structures. These responses point to care being experienced not as a question of motivation or ethos, but as a capacity issue.

Notably, the support schools identified map closely onto the pressures outlined in [Section 5.3](#). Requests for protected time and staffing directly mirror the reported reliance on goodwill and informal labour, while calls for training, supervision and specialist support reflect the emotional and professional demands placed on staff responding to increasingly complex student needs. In this sense, schools are not asking to care more, but to be better supported in the care they already provide.

This emphasis on infrastructure is also consistent with survey findings. While safeguarding and protection attracted near-universal agreement, confidence was markedly lower in relation to the organisational conditions that sustain care as ongoing work. As shown in [Figure 4](#) below, fewer schools expressed strong agreement that collaboration is facilitated, that staff experiencing challenges are supported, or that care-related labour is formally recognised. The pattern suggests a system in which care is structurally required but only partially resourced.

6. Discussion: care between ethos and infrastructure

This study set out to examine how care is organised, experienced and supported within ETB post-primary schools, with particular attention to the relationship between care as an ethical commitment and care as an organisational practice. The findings complicate simplified narratives that frame schools as either caring or uncaring institutions. Instead, they point to a more uneven landscape in which care is widely present but differently secured. Some forms of care are strongly institutionalised, stabilised through formal governance and regulatory frameworks. Others rely more heavily on local organisational conditions, relational work and professional goodwill. The discussion that follows brings these patterns together to consider what they reveal about responsibility for care within contemporary schooling in Ireland, and about the conditions under which care is currently sustained.

The strongest consensus across the data concerns safeguarding and protection. Child protection, anti-bullying, risk identification, critical incident procedures and Student Support Teams attract near-universal agreement. These are forms of care that are highly formalised, procedurally defined and externally accountable. They operate through clear policy frameworks, designated roles and routinised processes. In Tronto's (2013) terms, this is care organised as institutional practice: responsibility is allocated, standards are set, and compliance is monitored. The strength of agreement suggests that these forms of care are relatively insulated from local organisational variation. They do not depend primarily on discretionary judgement or informal coordination, but are embedded within the operational infrastructure of schooling.

This pattern is consistent with international research on care and governance in education, which suggests that education systems are most secure where care aligns with risk management, safeguarding and liability (Gillies, 2011; Stengel, 2023). Jackson (2025) similarly argues that contemporary education systems tend to stabilise care where it can be rendered visible and auditable, even as they struggle to sustain care that resists standardisation. The findings here support this claim. Care as governance functions reliably precisely because it is mandated and procedural. It is not optional, and it is not dependent on goodwill.

However, the data also show that this institutional security does not extend evenly across all domains of care. When attention shifts to everyday developmental work – supporting diverse needs, inclusion, wellbeing learning, social and emotional development, recognition of achievement and engagement with families – overall agreement remains high, but certainty weakens. Schools continue to report that such practices are in place, yet they are less likely to express strong confidence in their consistency or coherence. This step down in certainty is analytically important. It suggests not an absence of care, but a different mode of organisation.

Unlike safeguarding, these forms of care are not activated through compliance. They must be sustained over time through coordination, continuity and professional judgement. They depend on staff capacity, timetabling, collaboration and relational presence (Ortega et al., 2020). In Noddings (2013) terms, this is care as lived encounter: attentive, responsive and contextually situated. The findings indicate that this care is widely enacted, particularly within classrooms and student – teacher relationships. Wellbeing

learning and social – emotional support appear embedded in everyday practice rather than treated as discrete initiatives.

Yet the weaker confidence reported in relation to whole-school wellbeing policy points to a gap between care as practice and care as organisation. Although wellbeing work is happening, fewer schools express strong confidence that it is coherently stabilised at policy level. This suggests that policy, in this case, may follow practice rather than secure it. Care is being done, but not always institutionally protected. As a result, its consistency is shaped by local leadership, staffing and time rather than guaranteed through system-level infrastructure.

Engagement with parents and guardians further illustrates this unevenness. While most schools report active engagement, agreement levels are lower than for in-school practices. Care appears strongest where schools exercise the greatest organisational control, and more variable where it depends on coordination across institutional boundaries. This finding resonates with research on inclusive and relational care, which highlights the fragility of care work that extends beyond the immediate organisational context (Allen et al., 2018; Korpershoek et al., 2020).

The qualitative data make clear what sustains this carried care in practice. Time, resources, staffing and access to external supports emerge as the dominant constraints. Leaders describe care work being absorbed into lunch breaks, after-school hours and informal spaces, reliant on professional goodwill rather than protected organisational time. Emotional labour is repeatedly referenced, particularly in relation to responding to rising mental health needs and complex student circumstances. These accounts align closely with Lynch et al.'s (2009) analysis of affective and emotional labour as a hidden but essential dimension of educational work. Care is not simply enacted; it is carried, often at personal and professional cost.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that schools are disengaged from care or resistant to wellbeing agendas. On the contrary, the qualitative responses indicate a strong commitment to care across the sector. What schools identify as missing is not motivation, values or ethos, but infrastructure. Requests for staffing, training, protected time, counselling provision and access to external services dominate leaders' accounts of what is needed to sustain care. This reframes the problem. The issue is not that schools need to care more, but that they are being asked to care under conditions that do not adequately support the work required.

This distinction matters for how care is conceptualised in policy and practice. When care is framed primarily as a moral disposition or cultural value, responsibility is implicitly placed on individuals and schools to 'do more,' often without corresponding resources. Tronto (2013) cautions that such framings obscure the political dimensions of care: who is responsible, under what conditions, and with what support. The findings here reinforce this warning. Care is structurally required within schools, but only partially resourced. As a result, its sustainability depends on individual resilience rather than collective provision.

As such, this study suggests that care in ETB post-primary schools is characterised by a structural split. Care as governance is secured, routinised and protected. Care as everyday relational and developmental work is present, valued and widely enacted, but unevenly supported. This does not indicate a failure of care, but a system that relies heavily on care without fully institutionalising the conditions that allow it to be sustained.

The challenge, therefore, is not to exhort schools to be more caring, but to address the organisational and policy conditions under which care is currently carried.

The findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations, particularly its reliance on self-reported data from school leaders. Such accounts provide valuable insight into formal structures but may not capture who performs the everyday work of care, how labour is distributed across staff, or the degree to which school leaders support the wellbeing of staff themselves. Also, it does not capture variation in how individual teachers understand or prioritise care. The lack of organisational infrastructure does not fully explain variation in caring practices, as individual teachers may differ in the degree to which they regard care as central to their role, with implications for how consistently care is enacted within and across schools.

7. Conclusion: from caring values to caring systems

This paper has examined how care is organised and sustained within ETB post-primary schools, drawing attention to the relationship between care as a stated ethos and care as an organisational reality. Rather than asking whether schools care, the analysis shifts the focus to how care is structured, supported and constrained within contemporary schooling.

The findings show that care is not a singular or uniform practice but takes different institutional forms. Where care is formalised through safeguarding, risk management and compliance, it is stable and secure. Where care depends on ongoing relational work – supporting wellbeing, inclusion, transition and emotional development – it is more contingent on local organisational conditions. This distinction is not a deficit in schools' commitment to care, but a reflection of how different forms of care are differently supported within the system.

By foregrounding school leaders' accounts of time pressure, staffing constraints and reliance on goodwill, the study makes visible the labour through which care is sustained in practice. Care emerges not simply as an ethical orientation or a policy aspiration, but as work: time-consuming, emotionally demanding and unevenly resourced. In this sense, the paper contributes to care ethics by locating care not only in relationships, but in organisational arrangements that either enable or undermine those relationships over time.

A key implication of this analysis is that current approaches risk stabilising care where it is most visible and auditable, while leaving more relational forms of care structurally vulnerable. The danger is not that care disappears, but that it becomes increasingly reliant on discretionary effort rather than institutional support. This highlights an important question about whether care is embedded in teachers' professional identity, or whether some educators still experience care and education as separate and at times competing responsibilities. These considerations suggest a broader issue about sustainability, equity and the long-term capacity of schools to respond to growing and complex student needs.

For policy and system-level actors, the findings suggest that strengthening care in schools requires a shift in emphasis – from expanding expectations of care to investing in the conditions that make care possible. Time, staffing, specialist support and organisational protection are not ancillary to care; they are constitutive of it. Without such investment, care will continue to be carried through informal labour rather than embedded as a shared institutional responsibility.

By reframing care as an organisational and infrastructural issue, this study offers a lens through which to rethink how educational systems support the ethical work they already demand of schools.

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Appendix
Appendix A. Survey questions

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each item listed below using a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree).

Care: survey items
A child-protection policy is effectively implemented in the school
Procedures are in place to identify students who may be at risk
The school provides a caring environment that promotes the welfare of all for its members
A critical incident policy is effectively implemented in the school
An anti-bullying policy is effectively implemented in the school
A student support team is established in the school and operates in line with national guidelines
Teachers are encouraged to get to know their students
Additional supports are provided for students as required
Care is promoted as a core value of the school at a whole school and classroom level
Systems for assessment of student needs are in place in the school
Professional development opportunities are provided for staff as required
The school promotes an inclusive environment for all members of the school community
Students are provided with specific opportunities to learn the knowledge, skills and attitudes to support their wellbeing
The school acknowledges a broad range of student achievements
Effective systems for meetings, communication and reporting are in place for the work of the Support Team
Students are supported to develop social and emotional competencies
Systems for transitions are in place to support students to settle in to the school
The school engages with parents/guardians to support the student learning and development
Staff roles and responsibilities for student support are clearly delineated
A wellbeing policy is effectively implemented in the school
Staff are facilitated to collaborate with each other
Systems are in place to support staff who are experiencing challenges in their work
The school acknowledges staff achievements

Open ended questions

1. Outline the challenges experienced by school leadership in the provision of care for members of the school community.
2. Outline how your ETB/ETBI can support the school in the provision of care.