

# **IPPN Annual Principals' Conference Citywest Hotel, Dublin**

**IPPN President, Pat Goff**

**Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> January 2011**

What a year we have experienced since I last spoke to you at this very venue. Wexford won the All Ireland – it wasn't the one I was thinking of but it's a start. Congratulations to the Wexford Camogie team. Ireland got a new sponsor, the IMF. The dream of a white Christmas turned into a bit of a nightmare – even the children were glad to see the back of the snow. It is strange when you pull back the curtains in the morning and hear the wind and see the rain – you are actually happy. What next? Who knows? As they say down our way – 'the future ain't what it used to be'.

## **Education Cutbacks**

The latest round will most affect disadvantaged schools and their communities, kicking out the props and collapsing the scaffolding supporting them.

- 700 Primary teachers – gone
- RTTs – gone
- Visiting Teachers for Travellers – gone
- DEIS Rural Co-ordinators – gone
- English Language Support Teachers – going – going – gone? Who knows?

This shows very little understanding of the role that schools play in counteracting disadvantage. Let's hope our children will be given the priority they deserve by the new government. We don't want endless rhetoric. We don't want empty promises. We don't want the education of our children to be a pawn on any political chessboard. 'Our Children, Our Future' is the carefully chosen theme of this conference. We must invest in our children. After all, education is just as much a social as an economic need.

The cap on the number of SNAs will have an enormous impact on our schools. The care needs of the child with Special Needs have not changed. The supports needed to include that child in the class have not changed. The parents rightfully expect that their child will be supported and included in a mainstream class. The school has kept its part of the bargain.

Sadly, government has not. This child has a right to be included with her peers. So how will this cap operate?

Say next September you have a child with special needs, say autism, not toilet trained, with serious behavioural issues - every professional agrees that he needs the support of an SNA - yet the quota of SNAs is used up.

So what will happen? You must take the child. The class teacher must implement a staged approach in Junior Infants along with the other 27 pupils, some of whom may also require this approach. You, as Principal, will be asked to intervene - meet with the class teacher, meet with the support teacher, meet with the parents, meet with other professionals if you can get them to a meeting, and also, for over 70% of you, teach your class full time.

You will be left with Hobson's choice - how do you balance the needs of this child and the needs of the rest of the class? Don't tell us that this won't impact on all the children in that class, on you and on the staff.

It is tough when your school loses resources. The resources of special schools and special classes are being brought back to the mid nineties - the time of the SERC report. In our own school, we've had the pain of telling teachers and SNAs their jobs are gone, and telling the parents the support level for their child is greatly reduced. I know full well the struggle you are going through trying to maintain a credible service.

Tá na Gaelscoileanna ag fulaingt na gearrtha siar chomh maith. Tuigimid an dúshlán atá ag príomhoidí ins na scoileanna sin.

Professional development has also been seriously cut. LDS is now part of the new PDST and has only three full-time primary school leaders left to cover the whole country. It is a tribute to Paddy Flood, Kevin Hennigan and Gretta O'Shea that they have managed to provide so much support this year to Principals through the Misneach and Forbairt programmes.

## **Literacy and Numeracy**

The PISA results show Ireland has gone from near the top of the rankings for literacy and numeracy to barely average. As educators, this is deeply concerning. How has this happened? Ireland has experienced major demographic change with a steady increase in the number of non English-speaking immigrants from 2000 to 2009. But the decline in standards is not solely the result of the arrival of the New Irish. Did the introduction of the Revised Curriculum impinge on standards of literacy and numeracy? In our consultation survey, 8 out of 10 of you tell us that curriculum overload is a significant factor. 3 out of 4 of you want time to be taken from other subjects to further support literacy and numeracy. From what you tell us, there is a need for some curriculum reform. We urgently need a national strategy for literacy and numeracy. This strategy must start with pre-service teacher education and continue through to probation and actual practice in every classroom. This should be possible in a country with a population less than that of Manchester.

Many DEIS schools, including my own school, have adopted Reading Recovery, Math's Recovery and First Steps. But, is this the solution or are we using these as sticking plaster to cover a bigger problem? Would it be better to go back to basics and focus every teacher in every school on literacy and numeracy? To achieve this, we would need to have far greater flexibility in how we deploy teachers.

If I had the choice to redeploy some support teachers as extra class teachers, I'd love to see the standardized test results in those classes. Many schools might not have the space to deploy teachers in this way, but at least, there should be choice. There should be far greater trust placed in the school to make decisions in the best interests of the children.

## **Inspectorate**

We are delighted that Dr. Harold Hislop is here with us this evening. We congratulate him on his appointment as Chief Inspector and wish him well in his new role. We look forward to building strong links, through co-operation and dialogue, with Harold, his deputy Gary Ó Donnchadha and their colleagues in the years ahead. Down through the years, Principals have valued the good working relationships most of them have with their Inspector. We were pleased to see that many of the issues we raised in July with the inspectorate were taken on board in the redesign of WSE and especially in the reduction of documentation required.

However, in our consultation survey, two areas of concern were raised by Principals:

- Firstly, Principals want to see much greater consistency in the way inspectors interact with Principals and teachers and the information they require.
- Secondly, the probation of Newly Qualified Teachers. Principals want to play their part. But 98% of them want the Inspectorate to retain ultimate responsibility for probation. Whether it rests with the Teaching Council or the Inspectorate, Principals cannot accept this responsibility and increased workload. This seriously affects our terms and conditions of employment and must be dealt with through the appropriate channels, even if this means amending the legislation. Enough should mean enough.

### **Children First**

I have had the privilege of meeting and talking to many Principals throughout the year. I have been inspired by your positive attitude and your ability to keep morale high in difficult times. This doesn't surprise me when 94% of you said in the survey that despite all the challenges, you enjoy your job as Principal.

The findings of our survey also reflect your positive response to the call we made at last year's conference for Principals to prioritise child protection. It's reassuring that schools are compliant with the key requirements of child protection procedures. However, one in five Principals has not yet received any formal training in their role as Designated Liaison Person. This figure rises to one in three of Deputy DLPs who need training. This is an area that needs to be addressed urgently.

### **Teacher Training**

The role of Principal regarding the management of teaching quality is rapidly coming into sharper focus. Much of this focus will be on literacy and numeracy. As practitioners we know that a 1st class honours degree does not always result in higher teacher competence in the classroom. IPPN welcomes the introduction of the 4th year in the B. Ed programme provided it is not more of the same. We want the focus to be on the core competencies of teaching literacy and numeracy as well as far better preparation for teachers' classroom management skills and their ability to communicate with parents.

This can only be done through a new model of teacher placement in schools. Another challenge is the fact that an increasing number of our new teachers are now being trained

online, in private institutions or overseas. This raises genuine questions as to uniformity of standards.

## **IPPN**

It's hard to believe that IPPN is now over ten years old. What was very pleasing from our survey is that 94% of you feel that IPPN has made a positive difference to your role as school leader. In 2010 alone the IPPN Support Office dealt with 2,000 professional queries from Principals. Just as a school is only as good as the staff within it, so it is with the IPPN Support Office. We are extremely fortunate in having a talented and committed staff. Having worked closely with them over the past year and a half, I can only marvel at their professionalism and commitment to you. Could I thank the Support Office staff here publicly for their great work on your behalf? Míle buíochas. There is a saying that there is never a good school without a good Principal. Likewise, we are indeed fortunate that the leadership of IPPN for the last ten years has been in good hands – could I thank the man who only gets it right 99% of the time – Seán Cottrell.

In the space of the last three years 30% of you are new to the challenging and rewarding role of Principal. If I have one wish for the coming year, it is that all Principals would fully avail of the opportunities to participate in their local Principals' support group and in their IPPN County Network. This form of peer support is recognised as one of, if not the best, coping strategies for people in challenging roles.

Two representatives from each County Network make up the National Committee. This representative Committee elects the National Executive. One of the main functions of both is to formulate IPPN policy. I would like to sincerely thank the Principals who sacrifice their personal time, their valuable weekend time, to serve on the National Executive, the National Committee and County Network Committees. We are indebted to them for their professionalism, dedication and commitment on your behalf.

Imagine Principalship before IPPN. After all, more than half of you were appointed in the past ten years. From few or no supports and services in 1999, just consider that today:

- 6000+ Principals and Deputy Principals are actively contributing and sourcing policies and other resources on [ippn.ie](http://ippn.ie)
- 36,600 teachers are registered on [EducationPosts.ie](http://EducationPosts.ie)

- 3,600 teaching vacancies were advertised free on EducationPosts in the last calendar year
- 13,700 teachers are registered for TextaSub alerts
- Over 2,000 schools are using TextaParent
- It is simply amazing that 1 million networking emails are distributed each week.

Despite all that is happening around us – IPPN is going from strength to strength.

Virginia O'Mahony, IPPN's assistant director, has just started her two-year term as President of the International Confederation of Principals, which is a worldwide organisation of Principals. This is a remarkable achievement for Virginia and an honour for Principals in Ireland. Virginia has earned the respect of school leaders internationally through her natural leadership style and her consummate professionalism. Virginia, I can say with confidence, we are all extremely proud of you.

We are going through tough times and the cutbacks are impacting heavily both personally and professionally. The banks are broke, the government is broke, but our spirit is not broke and certainly not our sense of hope. Our hope is that the children we serve, especially those that are disadvantaged, will be a priority for the new minister and the new government. Likewise we must prioritise. I know that I speak for every Principal here when I say that the pride we have as Principals, and in our work, will not allow us to be satisfied with just being average in literacy and numeracy. There is a saying that "*reputation is for now, but character is forever*". Our reputation has taken a hit, now is the time to stand up and be counted and show our true character. We can do no less for our children, who are our future.