

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

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These are uncertain times for all of us. As we gather here this morning, political parties are immersed in a general election campaign. Whoever wins, huge challenges lie ahead for the next Government, for the next Minister for Education and for all of us as school leaders. A major challenge for the new government will be to meet the various needs of the rapidly growing number of children in the State. For generations, many children in Ireland have been appallingly treated. We all know this tragic story. Even now, children in institutional care, children with disabilities, children with special learning needs, in spite of best efforts, fall between the cracks of a system that is not designed to meet their needs. Where politicians and civil servants see statistics, Principals see children. To begin to right this wrong, I believe that our next Taoiseach should take a bold step and create a whole new Ministry for Children with full cabinet status to take charge of all areas, currently under Health and Education that are relevant to children.

In a short time, the profile of children in our classrooms has changed radically. As well as obvious demographic change, you tell us about the increasing numbers of children in your schools suffering from neglect and depression, displaying violent behaviours, attention disorders and emotional disturbance. Add to that the growing numbers of children who are trying to cope daily with family trauma, dysfunction, generational unemployment, as well as alcohol and drug addictions. Many of these challenges have always existed but they are now more prevalent than ever before.

In supporting these children, the child should be at the centre of all health and education services. Yet many of these services do not even communicate with each other. Often, the parents of children who are in most need of services are the least aware that these services exist and least able to access them. The onus should be on the service providers to reach all relevant children and not the other way around. Every child born in Ireland should be tracked from birth, not only in relation to health but also in relation to their educational and

care needs. If computerised tracking of every calf, cow and bull can be done by the Department of Agriculture for food traceability, why can't similar technology be put in place to make sure that no child misses out or gets lost in the system. You are familiar with the role of the SENO. Perhaps what we need are HENOs – Health & Education Needs Organisers. The horrific Roscommon case points directly to a fragmented system where professionals from multiple agencies had all visited the family home, yet failed to share knowledge with each other and consequently they abysmally failed those children. Attempts at internal reforms won't work; a whole new Department for Children is the least our children deserve. As Barnardos say 'a childhood lasts a lifetime'.

Government Bond

Our new Government will need to be creative as never before if we are to find adequate funding for primary education. It is important that the strongest possible signal is sent to the rest of the world that, in spite of Ireland's woes, Irish education will not suffer, and indeed will thrive in the years ahead. It seems that personal savings are at an all-time high in Ireland, with €90 billion currently on deposit – at low interest rates. I believe that the new government should issue a fully-guaranteed primary education savings bond, not unlike the SSIA's. This will provide the government with access to money from its own citizens at a much cheaper rate than we'll wind up paying to the IMF and the ECB. Such a bond would be an attractive option for savers and would guarantee a healthy future for primary education.

The New Minister for Education will have plenty of challenges too. I expect that this new Minister will consult with Principals and will find a most willing partner in IPPN to embrace sensible reforms.

I would like to see the Minister for Education establishing a cross-sectoral national advisory group to consider all major policy issues. This should include meaningful representation of parents and education practitioners and academics with no other vested interests. The formulation of education policy should, in the future, be solely based on educational best practice and be separated totally from negotiations on pay and conditions.

As part of the new Minister's induction and probation, I will organise a visit to a typical Irish primary school. This school has 112 children, 4 class teachers, 1 support teacher, 1 SNA, a part-time secretary and a part-time caretaker. It is led by a 50 year-old female Teaching

Principal who works 50+ hours a week. Let's call her 'Anne' for the moment. Anne is responsible for the quality of teaching and learning in all classrooms. She manages ancillary staff. She recruits, trains and advises a voluntary Board of Management. She tries to fit in time for her own professional development. She maintains relations with the Parents' Association, individual parents and the local community. By the way, Anne also teaches full-time, 30 boys and girls in fifth and sixth class. Anne is on prescribed medication for high cholesterol, blood pressure and sleep problems. While Anne loves her job, she feels it's affecting her health. Being constantly overwhelmed by her non-teaching workload and feeling guilty about the quality of her own teaching – are the two issues that have caused her greatest stress in the last 12 months. I haven't made up this profile. It is based entirely on the data you gave us in the consultation survey.

It is inhumane for any Minister to continue to take for granted the personal sacrifices made by Teaching Principals. Of all the reforms needed, overhauling the role of the Teaching Principal has to be the top priority for the next Minister.

While Professional Development for Teaching Principals is vitally important, I am acutely aware that the challenges of any role which is so obviously overloaded cannot be addressed by training alone. The role itself needs to be overhauled. I suggest two possible solutions:

- First – Provide a full-time skilled administrator to reduce the volume of non-educational tasks carried out by Principals. After all, is it financially wise to have someone on a Principal teacher's salary doing the job of a clerical officer?
- Second – Coinciding with the retirement of a Principal, appoint an Administrative Principal to lead two small schools. Two out of three Teaching Principals say they would consider such a move as a viable option. Let's hope that IPPN's research, published in 2006, describing clusters and federations of schools, will provide viable alternatives to forced amalgamations. One thing is for sure, small schools would be wise to invent their own future because for certain, if they don't, Colm McCarthy or the IMF will.

Dare I mention In-School Management? In-School Management was the outcome agreed by all as the best solution to the intolerable workload of Principals. Five years have passed

since the working group on ISM finished and we were told that a circular was imminent we're still waiting! Has this circular been formally abandoned or, is it like the missing homework, has it been eaten by the dog?

Thankfully, there is enormous goodwill among teachers and sometimes all you need to do is ask. Just remember, *'Moaners don't give and givers don't moan'*.

In passing, could I make this observation about the additional hour per week per the so-called 'Croke Park Agreement'. This is a unique opportunity for Principals to secure further valuable and productive time with staff. It should be used by the Principal and staff to come together without interruption to consult, plan and evaluate the work of the school. We must have the courage, as professionals, to do the right thing with this time and not let it be eroded by trivia. We know of some Principals who are using their support groups to come up with a common approach to the use of this time, a good example of collegiality.

In other countries, education policy-makers have understood for years the influential and multiplying effect that Principals have in their schools. Every euro spent on improving the recruitment, training and ongoing support of school leaders is paid back several times over through the positive impact it has on the whole school. We know from experience that, for any change to be sustainable, it must have the endorsement and commitment of the Principal. Otherwise, the change will not last.

In the words of our good friend Professor Michael Fullan:

'There are no examples of school-wide success without effective school leadership; all examples of school failure include weak or ineffective leadership'.

The nature and scale of cutbacks in education have proven that there is no vision for education in Ireland at government level. In stark contrast, Principals and their staffs have developed a clear vision for their own schools. So much so, they fundraise up to one third of the school's running costs to fulfil that vision. Minor miracles are performed on a daily basis akin to the miracle of the 'loaves & fishes'. Despite all the challenges, schools are extremely positive places. Your demeanour as a Principal is probably the key factor that determines

the mood of the school. Teachers subconsciously observe the body language of their Principal. What they witness has a profound effect on their own attitudes and behaviour. The late Teri Garvey, who chaired the Department's working group on the role of Principal in 1999, wrote that '*many schools take on the personality of the Principal, so much so that people sometimes refer to a school as being so and so's school.*' I think Teri got it spot on. In reality the ethos or culture of a school is largely determined by the personality and the leadership style of the Principal.

Morale

All of our personal finances have taken a serious hit and the cuts in school funding and staffing are starting to bite. A major challenge for us all in the months ahead is to keep encouraging our staff. This will not be easy but if Principals don't do it, who will? Never before has there been a greater need for Principals to model hope and positivity. Even in the greatest hardships, no one can take away the control we have over our own attitude. Remember, '*Life is 10% of what happens to us and 90% of how we react to it.*' Every one of us has the power to choose how we react to people and events. Think of the influence the leader of the trapped Chilean miners had on his colleagues that ultimately led to their survival. It is said that '*unity is strength, knowledge is power, but attitude is everything!*'

Don't underestimate the influence you have over your school community. When you choose to react positively, you inspire those around you without their knowing it. This brings to mind the phrase '*the best Leader's work is done when the people say, we did it ourselves.*'

Each one of you is an incredibly important person. You lead so many people through their most formative years. How well you do this will affect their life chances. They may not remember all that you taught them, but they will remember the example you gave as a leader and how you treated them as a child. You are also a role model for your staff. If they see a workaholic, burnt-out Principal, it won't inspire them to lead others. Now more than ever, you have a responsibility to be a little bit selfish and look after yourself. No one will thank you for being a martyr but you will earn their respect if you demonstrate all that is best in the privileged job that is Principalship.

You know, as Nelson Mandela tells us, that '*education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world!*' ENDS