

Seán Cottrell

I'd like to speak to you this afternoon about leadership and vision and the extraordinary contrast between what we are witnessing at national level and what we see in primary schools across the country.

Even to the casual observer, it is clear that there is an extraordinary absence of leadership at national level. Politicians, bishops, bankers, developers, trade unions and state agencies can all take their share of the blame for subverting their mandate to lead while neglecting the interests of those they were supposed to serve. The concept of 'servant leadership' has been replaced by 'self-serving leadership', where vested interests take priority over the common good and where self-preservation comes before everything else.

Those who let us down and took advantage of our trust brazenly defend their positions claiming it wasn't their fault, they didn't know about it or it was the culture of the day. There is a palpable anger amongst ordinary people whose incomes are cut, whose savings have disappeared or whose jobs are lost. As if this wasn't enough, the evidence of horrific and systemic child abuse has shocked our nation. Listening to the stories of survivors has turned our stomachs and unleashed an anger not seen before. Common to all these scandals is the refusal to accept responsibility, the determination to cover up and the likelihood that nothing will really change.

The public has been appalled on discovering the reckless and outrageous behaviour of those who paraded themselves as role models and icons of success in their respective fields. As they have still not been held accountable, it's easy to see how you as school leaders could become frustrated, demoralised or even cynical. But you haven't and that is the difference between real and bogus leaders. If we have learned anything in the last two years, it is that a leader who is without integrity is absolutely nothing.

Three years ago, there was an air of confidence and ambition which gave educators a sense of real hope. Hope that real investment in education was finally happening and that our education system would reach the standards and potential that we knew were possible. It is simply unbelievable that we are here in 2010 at a conference for school leaders in shock, anger and disbelief trying to come to grips with a return to the resources and salaries of a bygone era. Regrettably, the rising tide did not lift all boats. The number of children that continue to be taught in prefabs, the dependence on parents to pay for basic operating costs of schools, the embarrassing state of ICT in schools and just now the doubling in the cost of water, suggests that the Celtic Tiger never went to school.

Add to that the ruthless culling of Special Needs Assistants and English Language Teachers and school secretaries and caretakers working for a minimum wage...begs the question, how on earth could this have happened? But this didn't just happen. Those who were in charge, still drive their luxury cars while each week dozens are jailed for non-payment of fines!

In stark contrast, you have led by example, managing vast amounts of change in education with which you are all familiar. The quality of leadership evident in primary schools has been truly remarkable. If it were Principals and DPs who were leading our banks, churches and state agencies, somehow I doubt we would be in the mess that we are in now. What if it were the other way around?

Seán Cottrell

Imagine the cross between Celebrity Bainisteoir and Fantasy Football. *Think of a primary school with Bertie Ahern as Principal, Desmond Connell as the School Patron, Roddy Molloy chairing the Board and Seán Fitzpatrick as Treasurer? Then you could have Liam Carroll building the school extension – money would be no problem as Seán Fitzpatrick could get a 120% loan from Michael Fingleton – and it wouldn't even show up in the books!*

Staff morale has taken a hammering due to savage cuts in school budgets followed by the severe blow to teachers', Principals' and Deputy Principals' personal finances. Low teacher morale is detrimental to children. Perhaps the greatest challenge for school leaders in 2010 will be to provide positive leadership to your teachers and staff and to inspire them to be the best that they can be for every single child in your school.

Imagine for a moment that you are a teacher and not the Deputy Principal in your school. Consider the difference it would make to you as a teacher having a Principal and DP who model hope rather than despair, positivity rather than cynicism. As school leaders, our attitude to this education catastrophe will have a deep and long-lasting impact on teachers and children in our schools.

Sometimes we underestimate the degree of influence we have over our teaching colleagues. A single, credible, positive voice can outweigh a dozen whingers. To make that difference, it is critical that you focus all of your time and energy on things that you can influence or control. And it is even more vital that you smother the forces of negativity by depriving them of your attention.

Understandably, there are times when you will grow tired of the relentless conveyor belt of problems that teachers, parents and children bring to you on a daily basis. However, in the words of former US General Colin Powell *'the day people stop bringing you their problems is the day you are no longer their leader'*.

By any measure, the roles of Principal and Deputy Principal have been synonymous with professionalism, responsibility and service to the community. There are few roles with such a high concentration of committed, caring and passionate professionals. You show entrepreneurship, innovation and ingenuity in the way you lead, manage and achieve so much progress in schools that are so under-funded and under-resourced. Your leadership has inspired others. You have sacrificed your private and family time. All because you believe that the children in your school have the right to the best possible learning you can give them and too often if you don't go the extra mile, no-one else will.

Curriculum

We heard Paul Rellis speak this morning about educating the children of today for careers and technologies that have not yet been invented. So let us focus for a moment on our children's right to an appropriate education in 2010. Just think of the reality of children's lives today. They have to deal with peer pressure in relation to alcohol and drugs as well as bullying, racism and homophobia.

Many children are anxious and unhappy about their weight and self image. In a recent survey of Principals and Deputy Principals, depression and other mental health issues were identified as areas of growing concern in primary schools.

The deliberate sexualisation of children in music, television, films and magazines will have devastating consequences. We have become aware in the past year of at least

Seán Cottrell

three primary schools where children have ended their own lives. Yet, the curriculum allocates just one hour per week to PE and just half an hour for Social, Personal and Health Education. Of course schools are not the panacea to solve all the social ills of our time but now, more than ever before, they have a vital role to play in the physical, social, emotional and psychological development of the child. What children learn today must be relevant to their future. We urgently need to examine how our primary education system can best equip children with a far deeper and broader range of inter, and intra-personal skills that will be so vital for the lives they will live.

I am delighted to hear Anne Looney acknowledge this issue and that she is committed to holding, as she called it, serious conversations to determine new curriculum priorities.

While acknowledging the rich quality of the revised curriculum, we need to re-examine priorities and the amount of time allocated to various subject areas. We need to find more creative and innovative ways of addressing the over-crowded curriculum which is causing considerable stress in schools. Unfortunately, the influence of the Leaving Cert and Junior Cert high stake exams reaches deep down into the primary curriculum, where a subject that is not going to be measured by CAO points, is not worth teaching.

Leadership in a time of crisis

So what do leaders do in a time of crisis?

First and foremost leaders define reality. They distinguish the possible from the impossible. They offer direction and above all, leaders offer hope. The influence of leadership is never greater than in a time of crisis. And for this reason, we have to be very aware of our own 'leadership attitude' as it has such an important bearing on how we are perceived by others.

So where do Deputy Principals fit into the Leadership frame? There has been a longstanding pattern in Ireland whereby Deputy Principals rarely applied for the post of Principal for a variety of reasons, not least the lack of financial incentive and in some cases an actual loss in salary. Thankfully, this trend appears to be changing. In the last two years, a growing number of Deputy Principals have been appointed to the role of Principal within and beyond their own schools. This is a much healthier career path and is also in line with International best practice.

It is IPPN's policy that Principals should be appointed on a seven year contract, recognising that it doesn't suit everyone to take on the role of Principal for the rest of their teaching career. According to our research, offering leadership on a fixed-term contract will attract greater numbers of teachers to apply for the role. The vast majority of Principals felt that such a model would actually benefit schools with a renewal of energy and ideas.

We all know that leadership does not come automatically with the title. Leadership is essentially about influencing others for the greater good and there is no leadership without followers. It is a poor school that has only one leader. We regularly hear successful teams in sport referring to having leaders throughout the team. Given the complexity of demands made on schools, the leadership role of Deputy Principal has never been more important. Thankfully, the vast majority of schools have both Principal and Deputy Principal working together and 'singing from the same hymn sheet'.

One of IPPN's goals is to see the role of Deputy Principal as a vital step on the career path towards Principalship. Between 2009 and 2010, almost 800 Principals will have

Seán Cottrell

retired. That's almost one quarter of all Principals. This is a colossal loss of tacit knowledge and experience. With this in mind and given your leadership experience, I urge you to seriously consider taking that further **step-up** to the role of Principal. It is vital that the best teachers in our schools who have already shown their leadership ability compete for the role of Principal.

The presence of IPPN has, we believe, made that step-up less daunting to those taking on the role of Principal. Our mentoring programme, local support groups, online courses and a confidential helpline, are among the services we have developed to support you.

As I speak, many of you here today, may well be heading in that direction and if you are – may I recommend that you avail of our online summer course called 'Ciall Ceannaithe'. This course is designed to help those who are applying for the role of Principal or those beginning in the role.

Your decision to participate in this conference sets you apart from many others. You have a desire to learn, and a willingness to lead. None of our schools have the model children, the perfect staff or the ideal facilities – nevertheless, we do our best with what we have and keep our focus at all times on what we can do.

As you make the journey home today, you will reflect on what you have heard from speakers, workshops and colleagues. Perhaps you might also reflect on your own leadership role and ask yourself, am I ready to take that further step up to leadership?

Go raibh maith agaibh.

ENDS