

School leaders are managing a crisis in staffing, lack of resources and supports for children's mental health and special educational needs (Nov 2022)

The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) hosts its annual principals' conference at the INEC in Killarney this week. 1,000 primary principals have gathered for their first face-to-face conference in almost three years. The theme of the event is 'REAL: Reflective, Empowered, Authentic Leadership'. Keynote speakers include Minister for Education Norma Foley, former Dublin football manager Jim Gavin, Chanelle, Lady McCoy, Director of the Centre for School Leadership Mary Nihill and CEO of the National Council for Curriculum & Development Arlene Forster.

Opening the event, IPPN CEO Páirc Clerkin paid tribute to the '*authentic, compassionate and resilient leadership*' shown by primary principals over the past few years. Referring to a number of tragedies in school communities, including Creeslough, the Ashling Murphy case in Tullamore, and the many schools supporting 8,000 primary-age children and their families fleeing the atrocities in Ukraine, he commented that principals '*continue to support those distraught communities as they endeavour to navigate their way through times of incredible sadness. Once again, the primary school principals of Ireland have risen to the challenge of leading our schools under extremely difficult circumstances, always putting the needs of the children in your care above all else*'.

The IPPN CEO listed a number of key challenges school leaders are facing, including

- a crisis in the staffing of schools
- a wave of mental health issues in children
- extra responsibilities and more workload being added to the role of principal
- reduced supports for school leaders following the loss of the deputy principal administration days
- ineffective processes and inadequate resourcing of special educational needs
- compelling schools to open special classes without proper planning and supports.

The crisis in staffing is a particular challenge in Dublin and the surrounding areas, and the availability of substitute teachers is an issue nationwide. According to the IPPN CEO, '*We are at crisis point in relation to staffing. More than a quarter of the schools who responded to our recent survey do not have their full staffing quota. Nearly 2 in 3 Dublin schools are short staffed. Positions on supply panels remain vacant. The situation is critical in Dublin, Wicklow and Kildare. This has an impact on all children, but especially on the most vulnerable children in our schools.*' He continued '*Many of our SET teachers are finding themselves placed in classrooms simply to keep schools open. The immediate reinstatement of the facility for schools to bank hours when no substitute is available is of vital importance as is long-term investment in the CLASS hours programme, if we are to minimize the loss of teaching time to our most vulnerable children.*'

In relation to the mental health of children, Mr Clerkin gave a stark statistic *'More than 10,000 children are currently on a HSE waiting list for mental health treatment with more than 4,000 of these waiting over a year for an appointment with professional services, and that doesn't include all those children who don't meet the criteria to be placed on a waiting list'*. In terms of the support provided by schools, he stated that *'The needs of these children lie far beyond what schools can provide. This is the point where external support is needed, and too often, this is the point where children are failed. We know that where children are experiencing mental health issues, early and appropriate intervention works and delays in service provision have a very damaging effect.'*

Looking at the solutions, IPPN welcomed the commitment of the minister to pilot programmes which *'will enhance the supports to children and schools within the school setting, with teams of health and education professionals working with school clusters to support children directly in the schools where they learn.'*

In relation to special educational needs, Mr Clerkin stated: *'the voice of the school leader must be listened to – and their message is loud and clear - the system is not working. Special needs are either met or they are not and, if not, there is a consequential impact not only on the child with special needs but also on the other children in the class.'*

Regarding the opening of special classes, IPPN proposes an amendment to the Admissions legislation, to allow schools to receive advance applications on behalf of children who have a recommendation for placement in a special class or school - 24 months in advance of their school start date. According to the IPPN CEO, *'This would alleviate difficulties and negate the need for section 37A. It would provide certainty to parents about school placement, and, most importantly, would give children in need of a special class placement the opportunity to attend the same local national school as their brother or sister.'*

The CEO summarised the issues for school leaders and called for action from the Departments of Education and of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Oireachtas: *'Given the shortcomings of our school governance structure and the over reliance on school leaders to keep our schools operating effectively, [they] must put every resource in place to support those of whom unacceptable demands are being made. Anything less will mean recruitment and retention of school leaders will become even more challenging in the future. Failure to attract the best teachers into leadership roles will make teaching a less attractive career in the future. We cannot allow that to happen.'*