

There can be no further prevarication on the unsustainability of primary school leadership. The time to act is now. (Nov 2022)

In his input at the IPPN annual principals' conference in Killarney today, IPPN President Brian O'Doherty focused on the current reality of primary school leadership setting out **a roadmap to allow school leaders to focus on their core purpose of 'leading teaching and learning'**.

Launching a report based on research undertaken over the past two years by IPPN on the issue of sustainable leadership, he assured those present that *'This is not an exercise in 'woe is us'. On the contrary, the objective of the project is to enhance school leadership, which leads to more effective schools, which leads to better outcomes for children. It's one of those rare opportunities where everyone could be a winner.'*

Mr O'Doherty summarised the purpose of the report: **'Effective school leadership is second only to effective classroom teaching as a positive influence on and determinant of pupil learning.** *Anything that supports and facilitates effective school leadership will have a positive impact on our leadership practice, school effectiveness and, ultimately, learner outcomes. However, the opposite is also true; anything that negatively detracts from our potential effectiveness as school leaders has a detrimental impact on us, on our schools and, more importantly, on children.'*

The system views the school leader as a key agent in enabling sustained school and system-wide change. Consequently, the role has been *'leveraged'*, leading to tasks and responsibilities being consistently added to the workload of school leaders, year on year.

In the recent report by former Chief Inspector Harold Hislop, one of the key recommendations was the need for those in leadership and management positions to 'place a more substantial focus on the leadership of teaching and learning'. The IPPN president's response: *'We couldn't agree more; our collective response is "if only".'*

Referring to a recent IPPN survey completed by over 1,000 principals, Mr O'Doherty highlighted that **school leaders gave an average rating of 3.96 out of 10 for the sustainability of their leadership role**, and commented that *'When I was a student in school, anything less than 4 out of 10 or 40% did not look good on a report card and usually led to hard questions having to be answered at home.'*

Another stunning statistic was the **97% of principals surveyed** who strongly agreed (78%) or agreed (19%) that **the key issue that undermines the sustainability of their leadership role is the number of tasks and responsibilities principals have to undertake that have little or nothing to do with the core purpose as school leaders.** *'In short, [school leaders] are not being given the time and space to do the job [they] signed up to do, which is compromising [their] effectiveness and undermining the sustainability of [their] leadership roles'.*

The **impact** of this lack of role clarity and increased workload **on principals' health and wellbeing was also explored in research done by Deakin University**, which compared results with research undertaken in 2015. The latest data reveals that the incidence of burnout, stress and depressive symptoms among Irish primary school leaders is almost double that of the healthy working population and more than double for sleeping troubles and cognitive stress.

The two highest sources of stress at work were identical to the top two identified in the 2015 study, namely quantity of work and lack of time to focus on teaching & learning.

Summarising the issue, he spoke about the current reality of school leadership in Ireland: *'Given the increased scores for negative health and wellbeing outcomes [...] primary school leadership is taking a significant toll on the health and wellbeing of our school leaders, and the situation is getting worse over time.'*

The report shows a way forward, a 'roadmap to sustainability', that focuses on six key areas:

1. Defining what effective school leadership looks like in terms of the relevant behaviours, skills and competencies as well as what constitutes its core purpose
2. How aspiring leaders can be prepared for and inducted into a role that should be both doable and impactful
3. The procedures by which school leaders are recruited
4. The importance of creating the time and space to lead
5. How a culture of shared leadership is crucial to school and leadership effectiveness, and how it can be better supported
6. What needs to happen in the governance space, to ensure a structure that provides oversight while also enhancing and supporting leadership.

Summing up, Mr O'Doherty concluded *'We understand that meaningful reform and change take time but the urgency of the need for action is clear. There can be no further prevarication on the issue of sustainable leadership. In the interests of the professional efficacy and personal health & wellbeing of school leaders around this country and, in the best interests of the children in our schools, the time to act is now.'*

Speaking yesterday in Killarney, IPPN CEO Páirc Clerkin gave a commitment to principals that *'the core objectives [of the sustainable leadership report] will remain the primary focus of IPPN's mission until such time as our colleagues in Deakin University reassure us that we and the wider system have succeeded in creating the environment for leadership to thrive in our primary schools.'*