



IPPN Submission to the Department of Education Inspectorate

**Review of *Looking at our Schools*
and SSE: Next Steps**

June 2022

1 INTRODUCTION

The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. Established in 1999, IPPN is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education as an official Education Partner, IPPN works with the Department of Education (DE), the National Parents' Council, management bodies, unions, education agencies, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,000 Principals and Deputy Principals, leading Ireland's 3,200+ primary schools.

We set out in this submission the substantive issues for consideration pertaining to the review of *Looking at our Schools* and the next steps for School Self-Evaluation, and look forward to engaging with the Department and the education stakeholders in due course.

2 LOOKING AT OUR SCHOOLS

2.1 OVERVIEW

Looking at Our Schools is an important policy document in the Irish educational context. It has an added resonance for the concept of school leadership and, in particular, for the role of the principal. No coherent overview of the role of the principal exists. The role and its attendant responsibilities lack clarity and, accordingly, identification of a core purpose is problematic. While it was intended as a tool to evaluate standards, the Quality Framework for Leadership and Management in *Looking at Our Schools* also helps to describe the main components of effective school leadership. In short, it allows us to “zero in” on what might be described as core purpose.

It is IPPN’s contention that, if school leaders were empowered to maintain their focus on this core purpose, as articulated in the practices of effective leaders and the standards in the Quality Framework, there would be a consequential impact on school effectiveness and it would enhance the sustainability of school leadership roles. The current reality in which school leadership is exercised means that the ability of school leaders to maintain their focus on that core purpose is undermined, as is their potential effectiveness and the sustainability of their leadership role.

IPPN has undertaken and commissioned research which will highlight the breadth of responsibilities that fall to school leaders, the disproportionate emphasis on management tasks as detailed over the equally important leadership dimension of the role, in circulars, policy guidelines and legislation, and the impact that this is having on school leaders’ health and well-being. IPPN will publish this data as part of its Sustainable Leadership report later this year.

2.2 IPPN NOTES AND WELCOMES

- the identification of the framework for use by primary and special schools
- the linkage of LAOS with the school self-evaluation process
- the linkage of LAOS with circular 0070/2018 and the culture of shared leadership that it espouses
- the updating of the framework to take account of recent educational reform and the impact of the pandemic on teaching, learning, leadership and management
- the inclusion of references to the deputy principal and other leaders in the school as a means of emphasising a culture of shared leadership and responsibility
- the reference to the importance of creating a collaborative culture of reflection
- the importance placed on the creation and maintenance of a positive school culture and climate
- the more nuanced consideration of pupil learning and attainment
- the emphasis placed on the importance of ongoing professional learning
- the more nuanced reference to teachers' recorded preparation
- the reference to the importance of positive and respectful relationships with colleagues and school management
- the consideration of what is required to facilitate continuity of learning in the event of school closures
- the importance placed on the sensitive management of transitions
- the recognition of the importance of emotional intelligence to effective leadership, and
- the framework for reflection on practice and policy.

2.3 IPPN WISHES TO HIGHLIGHT THAT

- the creation of a collaborative culture within a school is compromised by a lack of discrete time for school leaders to meet, to plan for and to embed such a culture – this is an issue of particular concern to schools with teaching principals where there is no opportunity within the school day for principals, deputy principals and other school leaders to collaborate

- the creation of a culture of shared leadership requires professional learning and support – it cannot be assumed that schools will organically move from a duties-focused consideration of an in-school management team to a team who has shared responsibility for the leadership and management of the school just because it is a policy imperative
- the possibility of identifying and recruiting a school leader who is emotionally intelligent is compromised by procedures that are solely competency focused and do not allow for a consideration of the ‘person’ of the leader.

2.4 CONCLUSION

IPPN welcomes the clarity that the *Looking at Our Schools* Quality Framework for leadership and management brings with regard to the practices aligned with the core purpose of school leaders. The challenge for IPPN and the wider system is to ensure that school leaders are enabled to maintain their focus on these practices and their core purpose without being diverted by tasks and responsibilities that are not in keeping with that core purpose.

3 SSE: NEXT STEPS

3.1 IMPORTANT MESSAGES THAT NEED TO BE REINFORCED

- Effective schools have always reflected on practice with a view to improving teaching and learning
- SSE has assisted the development and embedding of that culture in schools. The process promotes professional conversations about practice.
- It is important to emphasise that the focus of SSE should not solely or exclusively be on learner *outcomes*. The learner *experience* and teachers' individual and collaborative *practice* must also be also considered.
- The importance of the wider team being involved in the identification of priorities (where priorities are seen to have been imposed rather than agreed), must also be emphasised. If the wider team is not consulted in this regard, it is less likely that the necessary buy-in will be achieved to ensure school improvement.
- It is also important to stress that the process involves the gathering of *evidence* and not just the gathering of data. Evidence is a broader concept and takes account of practice and experience.
- The analysis or 'sense-making' of evidence/data requires discrete skills and it should not be assumed that such skills are present in the school
- It is crucial that what is targeted is specific and not overly ambitious or wide-ranging
- If the focus of tasks and targets is solely on what is measurable, relevant priorities may be overlooked
- Sufficient time must be afforded to schools to implement and embed the school improvement plans before moving to a further cycle of SSE
- The focus should be in keeping and aligned with the school's stated priorities and undertaken within the PIEW (Pilot, Implement, Embed, Wait) Framework.

3.2 SCOPE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE SSE PROCESS

- SSE should be promoted as a valuable opportunity for leadership of teaching and learning
- Furthermore, it should be promoted as a valuable opportunity for that leadership of teaching and learning to be shared
- The current reality in which school leadership is exercised does not allow sufficient time and space for such a focus on leadership of teaching and learning – some decluttering of the role of school leader must be undertaken to allow for meaningful engagement with SSE. This is our core purpose as school leaders and we should not be diverted from it by having to undertake duties and responsibilities that are not aligned with that core purpose.
- Professional development in the area of evidence/data gathering and analysis must be made available to all schools
- SSE provides an obvious opportunity to develop the advisory and support role of the Inspectorate – schools would benefit hugely from positive, proactive engagement with their inspector that was not evaluative and was focused on impacting on practice
- Such advice and support from the Inspectorate should recognise the validity of the PIEW framework in assisting schools in maintaining their focus on stated priorities.