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Thursday 8th February 2024

IPPN Deputy Principals’ Conference 2024

Thanks to Rachel & Mary, who will be back with you shortly, and, of course, sincere thanks to Páirc for being generous enough to share his slot with me. We talk about the importance of co-leadership or partnership – well Páirc lives and models that on a daily basis. But when he offered me the opportunity to contribute to this session, I’m betting that he didn’t expect the first thing that I’d focus on would be advertising slogans. You’ll just have to go with me on this one, Páirc.

There is an undoubted art to creating a memorable slogan that will also convey a sense of what your brand or product is about. Take the images on the slide. I’d imagine that if I asked the question, you wouldn’t be long telling me what the slogans of those brands are. Will we try it?

So my question to you is this, if you were creating a slogan for IPPN that would be both memorable and impactful, what would it be? Answers on a postcard to PO Box.....

No seriously, what would that slogan be? It’s a loaded question because, to be able to answer it, you need to wrestle with what it is that IPPN does and what it seeks to achieve. So let’s wrestle with that for a moment.

The graphic that you see on the screen details IPPN's mission, but I think that if you were to try and articulate it in one sentence, it would be that IPPN works to enhance leadership capacity, leadership effectiveness and leadership sustainability.

Why – because we know that effective leaders mean effective schools and effective schools mean better outcomes for children.

IPPN exists, and does what it does, because leadership matters.

And how do we seek to enhance that leadership capacity, effectiveness and sustainability? Well we do it in two ways – through the provision of supports & services, and through targeted advocacy.

We all know that effective teachers create an environment and culture in their classrooms that empower student agency. We also know that effective school leaders create an environment in their schools that empowers teacher agency. So, in a similar way, IPPN seeks to create a culture and environment that empowers your leadership agency which will in turn deliver the most effective schools. Obviously, we can’t do that alone, it requires other stakeholders, including the Department, to come to the party, but I’ll come back to that.

The suite of supports and services that IPPN offers to members must contribute to that culture of empowerment but it must also take account of the context in which leadership is both practised and experienced. That context is evolving and our understanding of that evolving context is crucial, as is the need to ensure that the supports & services IPPN offers are in keeping with, and informed by, your needs.

To ensure that this is the case, we plan to undertake a root and branch review of those supports and services through a process of member engagement. We need your voice to be heard to ensure that what we offer is relevant and impactful. The rich learnings that will emerge from such a process will enable IPPN to develop a revised and enhanced suite of supports and services, shaped by you.

Páirc referenced the department's significant, positive investment in supports for school leaders in recent years and that's true. And I would argue that those supports have been more heavily weighted towards principals than deputies.

When I spoke to you last year, I suggested that, if IPPN were to receive a report card on how it has facilitated the engagement and involvement of Deputy Principals in our work and in the various structures of the organisation, then I think it's likely that we would get an authoritative 'could do better'.

Over the last 12 months, we've made progress in this area. We now have a greater number of DP support groups around the country and we have an increased number of deputies on our National Council. We've also developed a number of specific supports for deputies, including a pilot group mentoring programme for newly-appointed DPs, and we're in the process of convening an online support group for admin DPs.

It's IPPN's view that the supports that exist for principals, in terms of induction and coaching should be available, in the same manner, to deputies. We know our colleagues in Oide share that ambition and we look forward to collaborating with them to make it happen.

Granted, there's some distance yet to travel, but I think it's fair to say that we're moving in the right direction and that this year's report card might say – 'some improvement noted'.

As Páirc also referenced, in November 2022, we published the Sustainable Leadership report, the front cover of which you can see on the left-hand side of the screen.

We undertook this project because our direct engagement with you highlighted that existing school leaders aren't thriving in their roles, and we're failing to encourage greater numbers of potential or aspiring leaders to embrace leadership roles in our schools.

The first part of that report was an evidence-informed analysis of the current reality of primary school leadership.

That analysis focused on

- the extent of the work you have to do
- the nature of that work
- how it is impacting on the sustainability of your leadership role and
- how it is impacting on your health & wellbeing.

The second part of the report explored key issues and made specific recommendations in each of its sections - all targeted at enhancing the practice and experience of school leadership.

This has been the focus of our advocacy work since the publication of the report.

In order to keep you up to speed with what actions have been undertaken as part of that advocacy work, we've collated a Progress Report on the project. You should have received a copy of it when you collected your conference bag.

In the report, you'll find a matrix of the recommendations that were in the original report and what's been done since by way of advancing those recommendations.

Also included in the progress report is a section on what the latest evidence is telling us about school leadership. And you told us some really interesting things – some positive, some negative and some very relevant to what we're doing this afternoon.

We asked you to indicate if your leadership capacity, effectiveness and sustainability had increased, decreased or stayed the same over the last 12 months. You may be surprised to hear that 75% of the deputies, who responded to the survey, reported an increase in your leadership capacity and 46% reported an increase in your effectiveness as leaders. However, a majority of you (53%) reported a decrease in the sustainability of your leadership roles.

In order to put a metric on this, we asked you to rate (with a score out of 10) the sustainability of your leadership role. The totality of your responses rated the sustainability of your role at 5.34 out of 10. There's no comparable figure for 2022 as that survey issued only to principals because we were looking for school specific data and if the principal and deputy both completed the survey, we would be double counting the data from that school, which would have skewed the statistics.

The comparable score for all principals in 2023 is 3.61, down from 3.96 in 2022. Of particular concern is the mean score reported by teaching principals, which has dropped from 3.53 to just 3.18 in the last 12 months.

In response to a question seeking to ascertain whether they would apply for the role of principal in their school, if it became available, 81% of the deputy principals who replied indicated that they wouldn't.

So we asked them to share the reasons why they wouldn't apply and they could choose more than one reason.

- So 74% said that taking on the role of principal would likely have an adverse impact on their work/life balance.
- 70% said that taking on the role of principal would likely have an adverse impact on their health and wellbeing.
- 59% said that they didn't want the additional workload and responsibility.
- 57% said that the increased allowance payable to principals isn't sufficient compensation for the additional workload and responsibility.
- and 41% said that they simply didn't wish to be a principal.

Given the fact that 81% of deputy principals said they wouldn't apply for the role of principal but only 41% said they didn't wish to be a principal, we can conclude that there is a cohort of deputy principals who are open to the idea of principalship, but are deterred by the manner in which it is currently practised and experienced.

So,

- what can we conclude from what we know and
- what needs to be the focus of IPPN's work?

Three areas clearly emerge which, if addressed, have the potential to have a profound impact on leadership practice in Irish primary schools.

It's clear that,

- if you were enabled to maintain your focus on your core purpose
- if you had greater capacity to share leadership effectively and
- if our schools had a governance structure that had the capacity to meet its onerous responsibilities,

then

- there would be greater leadership capacity within our schools,
- that leadership would be more effective and
- those leadership roles would be more sustainable.

Central to achieving this will be reaching consensus on what it is that we want our school leaders to be doing. We need to give you the opportunity of doing not only the job you signed up to do, but the job that we should all want you to be doing. This will be a key focus of IPPN's ongoing advocacy work on Sustainable Leadership.

To finish on an upbeat note, I'm going to circle back to the member survey and one of the really positive things you told us. Despite the challenges that I've already highlighted and the lack of infra-structural supports, your responses indicate that there's some really good stuff happening in your schools with regard to the sharing of leadership

When I spoke to you last year, I emphasised the crucial importance of a partnership or co-leadership relationship between principal and deputy in terms of nurturing of a culture of shared leadership in the school. We looked at some of the elements of effective partnerships

before Anne Lynskey and Aoife O'Connor eloquently described to us what co-leadership looks like in practice in their school.

So it was hugely reassuring to see that 81% of you report that that you enjoy such a co-leadership or partnership approach to the leadership of the school with your principal.

Allied to the fact that 75% of you reported that your leadership capacity increased over the last 12 months and that 79% reported that your effectiveness as a school leader either increased or remained unchanged, these are definitely green shoots. Whatever it is you are doing to achieve this in your schools, it's definitely working.

But why would we keep those gems of what's working to ourselves? What can we learn from each other as school leaders and what can IPPN learn from you that will inform the way that we seek to support and empower you?

This is where we get to unleash the power of the network – to do the thing that IPPN was set up to do, which is the wisdom of the collective shaping and enhancing our own individual leadership practice.

This session is an opportunity for us to do just that – to talk and hear about the things that are working for others so that we can go back with an idea or two that may work in our own school contexts.

And so, to guide you through this process, I'm going to hand you back into the very capable hands of Rachel & Mary.