

SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES



IPPN CEO, Páirc Clerkin

Sustainability is the theme of our conference and I believe it is the key to unlocking the potential of school leadership. A crucial element of sustainability in our schools is the wellbeing of all the people in the school community, including the school leader.

In my view, our key responsibility as school leaders is to nurture positivity within the school environment – for everyone working and learning within it. It's not only about a culture of wellbeing. If the system, and we as school leaders, work to make the role more sustainable it will have a direct impact on our wellbeing. But you have to be able to sustain yourself first and foremost. 'A tree with strong roots can withstand the most violent storm. But the tree can't grow roots just as the storm appears on the horizon'. We need to work on developing those roots now in our schools and we need to make it a priority - for the sake of our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of everyone around us.

To make school leadership sustainable, we must develop a culture of shared leadership, a genuine sharing of responsibility and accountability. For that to work, middle leadership posts must be restored in all schools - having a full complement of assistant principals is critical. The work we put into middle leadership reaps rewards in the long-term. Development of leadership capacity in our schools should take priority over most other objectives. To focus on leading teaching and learning, school leaders also need to be supported by a highly-skilled and well-paid administrator to take ownership of school administration.

All change must be sustainable. If we are forced to take on too many initiatives or if we take on too much ourselves, if we proceed too quickly, if we don't prioritise appropriately, then the change becomes counter-productive. Managing change is one of the great challenges we face as school leaders – as is knowing when and how to say no!

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Looking back over my own time in school, if there is one thing I would do differently it would be to develop my communication skills to help my school community understand and appreciate why we need to prioritise and why we must say no at times. When a staff member or a parent comes to me suggesting that we take on another initiative, I would explain that we are already working on agreed priorities to improve the school. Ultimately we need to respect our own plan if we want others to respect it!

We also need to demand a system which itself plans in advance, communicates those plans clearly to schools, respects school autonomy and acknowledges school leaders who prioritise. The work of the Primary Education Forum will be crucial in terms of planning and managing system change more effectively. As Andy Hargreaves said at our recent symposium, we need fewer initiatives, and more initiative! As part of our own involvement in the Forum, we will continue to push for a system that focuses on sustainability for schools, and for school leaders.

IPPN also plays a crucial role in promoting sustainable leadership for our members. Since 2000, IPPN has been supporting and advocating for Irish primary school leaders.

While we have advocated loudly and relentlessly in relation to the very challenging role of the Teaching Principal right from the beginning, we have placed increased focus on this since September 2015 when we stated that achieving one Leadership and Management Day per week for all teaching principals was our top priority. The progress hasn't been what we had hoped and we understand that pay parity was prioritised in the last budget. One leadership and management day has to become the norm for every teaching principal. This will continue to be our top priority until it has been achieved.

We need to let go of that tendency towards perfectionism. For some things, 'good enough' has to be good enough! You can do this job but you cannot do it all and you certainly can't do it all on your own.

We are acutely aware of the issues school leaders are dealing with. We collaborate closely with the education partners to agree joint lobbying initiatives and are collectively working to improve the situation on the ground for our members. Progress is being made. We are hearing the right things from key people that they 'get' the issues and are working towards solutions. And I want to assure you that we will continue to work tirelessly on your behalf.

