

IPPN Submission - Education for Sustainability



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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 and Skills as an official Education Partner, IPPN works with the Department of Education and Skills (DES), 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 6,400 Principals and Deputy Principals, leading Ireland's 3,200+ primary schools.

IPPN has reviewed the *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development 2014-2020* and has set out below our feedback in relation to those elements of the strategy pertaining to primary education, particularly the following priority action areas:

1. Leadership and coordination
2. Data collection and baseline measurement
3. Curriculum at pre-school, primary and post-primary
4. Professional Development
6. Research
7. Promoting participation by young people
8. Sustainability in action.

1. Opportunities and Positives

Given the importance of education in developing key skills and knowledge to empower individuals and society to build a sustainable future, it is encouraging that the DES is reviewing its strategy in relation to Education for Sustainable Development (EBD) at its mid-point in 2018.

IPPN welcomes the focus on integration in the strategy across pre-school, primary, post-primary and further education sectors. As identified in the strategy, adequate supports and training will need to be provided to enable primary teachers and school leaders to effectively embed EBD in pupils' learning. The work done in the pre-school sector with the *Aistear* curriculum and the *Síolta* quality framework are excellent foundations upon which to build during the subsequent years of children's education.

There is already considerable emphasis in primary education on EBD-related content in the curriculum and in the holistic education of primary pupils. There are opportunities to build on this work, both in enhancing the curriculum at primary level and to build content at post-primary and further education levels, to increase the integration and embedding of EBD right across the sector.

A significant number of (optional) programmes, initiatives and strategies are already in place in the primary sector relating to EBD, including the Green Schools initiative, the Blue Star programme, the Yellow Flag award, to name just a few. While these are laudable and further the aims of the EBD strategy, they are not part of a coherent framework, they are not embedded within the curriculum and they require significant additional work over and above delivering on the curriculum. They usually require significant documentation to achieve the recognition required of the programmes, which can be onerous. A more sustainable approach would be to embed some of the key aspects of EBD learning into the curriculum, together with the requisite teacher training to ensure it is delivered to a high standard.

The strategy in 2014 acknowledged a dearth of information about what EBD-related professional development, training and supports are in place. It is IPPN's understanding that in 2018, there is still a lack of information to clearly indicate what actions are required to fully deliver the strategy. The Lifeskills Survey, undertaken in primary schools every three years, was to have taken EBD into account in its last iteration – it is not clear whether this has been achieved.

Also acknowledged in the strategy, professional development of teachers - whether during Initial Teacher Education, induction, continuous or lifelong learning stages of a teacher's career - is essential if the strategy is to be delivered. IPPN believes that the provision of EBD training to teachers is still very sporadic and 'patchy' and is not coordinated centrally e.g. by the Professional Development Service for Teachers or the Education Centre Network. This

presents a key opportunity for the DES to help deliver a key aspect of the EBD strategy. It is not clear whether the research intended to be carried out by the education centre network in 2015 in relation to EBD professional development was in fact undertaken, which is an opportunity to explore in the coming years.

Further promotion of Student Councils in primary schools would enhance the understanding among teachers and school leaders of children and young people's views on EBD. The advent of the Pupil and Parent Charter will also help strengthen the voice of these key stakeholders in education in relation to sustainable development.

The efforts to consult with children and young people in this and other strategic initiatives such as *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* are laudable and IPPN fully supports this aim. We believe it would be equally beneficial to consult with teachers and school leaders also, to ensure that the implementation of the strategy fits with how schools operate in reality. This is particularly important in relation to smaller schools led by 'teaching' principals, which constitute almost 60% of all primary schools, as their opportunities to examine, train, encourage and support other teachers in relation to EBD, or any other strategy or initiative, are severely limited.

IPPN has worked closely with the Teaching Council, the National Parents' Council, and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals to progress the joint aim of embedding a culture of wellbeing across school communities. This group is collectively known as the *Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners* group (WTL) and has hosted two national symposia on wellbeing (in 2015 and 2017) to encourage and support schools who wish to work on this area. There is a clear link between this group's work and the aims of the EBD strategy, which is an opportunity to be explored further by the DES.

2. Challenges and Concerns

If the DES is serious about implementing its strategy on Education for Sustainable Development, the related issues of under-funding and principals' workload must be addressed. It is disappointing that the strategy fails to mention leadership in schools as a crucial factor in the successful implementation of EBD by 2020, as the DES has publicly acknowledged on a number of occasions how essential effective school leadership is in effecting system change. Perhaps this oversight can be corrected as part of the review process and its related activities.

Another fundamental issue that needs to be urgently addressed is leadership and management capacity in schools, especially to review, implement and embed *any* system change. While Budget 2018 has partially alleviated the burden of the moratorium of promoted posts in schools, it is still extremely challenging for school leaders and Boards of Management to comply with the various DES and other directives given the limited human and financial resources provided, particularly to primary schools. The discrepancies in the funding and resourcing of primary versus post-primary schools are anomalous and an ongoing cause of concern and frustration.

The sheer volume of initiatives, strategies, programmes and research focusing their attention on schools needs to be acknowledged as an impediment to change. Many teachers are passionate about sustainable development and the various aspects of EDB which they teach, yet they are deeply concerned that adding more content to an already overloaded curriculum will result in failure. The only approach that would work is to integrate any new content across the curriculum and provide the resources, training and support to embed it effectively.

If the EBD strategy is to be delivered, it must be recognised that teachers require significantly more training and ongoing professional development in what would be expected of them. Furthermore, all schools must have adequate Broadband infrastructure. This is still not the case in a significant number of primary schools and must be achieved before any attempt is made to add further curricular content.

Another challenge to be addressed relates to how information about energy use in schools is gathered. As publicly-funded organisations, schools must report to the SEAI in detail on energy use each year since 2011. The issue for schools is that no-one in the school community is trained to do this nor has the time to do such work. If the DES and the State is serious about this aspect of sustainable development, then a centrally-resourced 'Energy Audit Team' should be set up to do this work, to identify the required improvements to create more sustainable school environments and the State should then fund those improvements, and facilitate the relevant works to be completed. To expect schools themselves to undertake such work takes them away from their core work - which is teaching and learning - and it also sets them up for failure, as they are neither skilled nor resourced to complete the work to a high standard.

A related issue is the matter of sustainable school buildings. The strategy sets out laudable goals and recommendations regarding energy-efficient buildings, yet the funding to deliver on these is simply not there, at least not in a sustainable, planned way. Schools are effectively left to apply for 'summer works' or 'emergency works' grants or to await minor works grants to undertake works such as re-roofing, upgrading mechanical and electrical infrastructure and improving insulation etc. These grants may or may not be allocated, and when they are allocated, often there is little notice given to allow schools to plan the works during periods of school closure. Again, a more centralised, fully-funded approach would ensure this aspect of the strategy would be implemented by 2020.

Conclusion

IPPN welcomes this review and is fully supportive of the aims and recommendations as set out in the strategy. Investing in the supports and training required to deliver on these aims will reap rewards in the sector, and in wider society. IPPN would be delighted to discuss any aspect of this submission with the DES.