

IPPN DEPUTY PRINCIPALS' CONFERENCE 2025

BRIAN O'DOHERTY, IPPN'S DEPUTY CEO

First and foremost, we know how difficult it is to extricate yourself from school, and all that has to be done to facilitate your attendance at the conference, so we're delighted you're here and in such numbers. Because, remember, IPPN is a network of school leaders and networks need to gather if they're to thrive and grow. Doing so affords us the opportunity to reflect on our practice as school leaders, and to learn with and from each other. We hope that these two days will allow you to renew old acquaintances and to establish networks of support that will sustain you in your leadership roles.

I think the scientist, comedian, teacher, and author, Bill Nye, summed up the potential of networking, and events such as these, best when he said that *"Everyone you'll ever meet knows something you don't"*.

While the overarching theme of the conference is Empowering Effective Teaching and Learning, something that we all aspire to do in our schools, in truth the conference falls into two distinct parts – and I don't just mean today and tomorrow.

In this plenary session this afternoon, the focus is very much on the importance of your health and wellbeing. It is an undeniable truth that you

can't possibly hope to lead as effectively as you'd like to, if you're not, in the first place, well enough to do so. And we know that your health and wellbeing are impacted by the experience of the practice of leadership.

Last November, the third and final report of the 3-year longitudinal study of Irish Primary School Leaders' Health and Wellbeing was published. Many of you would've participated in that research and we're grateful for your engagement.

So, what did the data tell us. Well, it tells us that we're not doing so well. The data revealed that the scores of primary school leaders for burnout, stress, sleep disorders, depressive symptoms, somatic stress and cognitive stress, are either nearly double or more than double those of the healthy working population.

Now it's important to acknowledge that a leadership role in any walk of life is likely to be challenging, and you'd expect the scores to be higher than those of the healthy working population, whoever they may be. But it's the extent of the differential that is the cause for concern, particularly the levels of burnout reported.

The research team concluded that, and I quote *'The three years of results demonstrate that Irish primary school leaders face numerous*

work-related challenges that impact their health and wellbeing. While they report experiencing meaningful work and community trust within their schools, they navigate a range of stressors, including high workloads and roles that are cognitively and emotionally demanding.

The diverse responsibilities school leaders manage often prevent them from dedicating sufficient time to key leadership tasks. Furthermore, the evidence in this report shows that many leaders work in environments and roles that put their health and wellbeing at risk. This is evidenced by the significant reports of burnout and health issues, which highlight the urgent need for interventions to create healthier and more sustainable work conditions for school leaders.’ End quote.

It was impactful when we shared the data with the stakeholders before Christmas. We do have their attention, and a coalition of support is definitely forming around our proposals. So, there is a tangible benefit in that.

But then, we have a moral responsibility to respond, in the here and now, to the level of ill-being, evident from the data. It was in that context that IPPN’s position paper on the wellbeing of school leaders was developed and published last year, and from which our Be Well, Lead Well campaign emerged.

In summary, that position paper:

- takes account of the current reality in which leadership is practiced
- it draws conclusions and makes practical recommendations to impact positively on school leader wellbeing and
- it endeavours to communicate a message of hope about the importance of your wellbeing, and what you and others can do to promote and protect it.

First and foremost, we have to acknowledge that we have personal responsibility for our own wellbeing. That's an easy thing to say, but not necessarily an easy thing to achieve, given expanding workloads, no discrete time for leadership and our ability to disconnect being consistently challenged. However, we need to prioritise our self-care and find ways of managing stress to better ensure our physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing.

We're not ignoring the responsibilities of others for your wellbeing. Clearly, the Board, as your employer, has a duty of care to you. Similarly, the Department also bears responsibility, given the obvious and fundamental influence it has on the workload and work demands of all school personnel. But the duty of care to ourselves is the bit over which we have some control, and about which we can make decisions that suit our personal

circumstances. Nobody will thank us for not doing it – least of all our families.

The research conducted by Maynooth University on deputy principalship in Ireland which was published last November highlights the fundamentally different experience of the role between the primary and post-primary sectors and there is much in the report that will resonate with you, that will be in keeping with your experience and that will affirm your thinking.

I have to confess to being somewhat challenged by the title of the research – Deputy Principals – A Hidden Asset in Schools. I ask the question – hidden to whom?

To policy-makers perhaps, but not to anyone who works alongside you on a daily basis and who benefits from your skills, your insights and your transformational leadership.

You will be reassured, however, to hear the research does make three things abundantly clear

- the urgent need to re-evaluate the role of deputy principal
- the impossibility of the task of being a full-time teacher while also administering, leading and managing the school and
- that deputies need dedicated time for leadership.

I don't think that there'll be any pushback from this room on any of those conclusions.

With regard to the recent review we've undertaken of the supports and services we offer, we're indebted to all of you who engaged with that review, either at the autumn meetings last year or via our member survey, which elicited over 1500 responses. In the survey, we sought information about

- the value you attribute to each individual support or service
- how helpful you found it (if you have availed of it)
- how often you have availed of or engaged with the support or service.

You might recall that we also gave you the opportunity to offer suggestions as to how existing supports and services could be enhanced and, as to whether other supports and services need to be developed. Reading through those 700 plus freeform responses was instructive.

The report of that review will issue to you in the coming weeks and it contains all of the quantitative and qualitative data you shared with us. We're encouraged by the high favourability ratings for value and impact that each of our supports and services received. Engagement levels are also good, but when we further analysed that data with reference to your leadership role – teaching deputy, admin deputy, teaching principal or

admin principal – differences emerged which have given us pause for thought as to how we can promote greater engagement by specific cohorts of members.

We've already started to act on the feedback received including the redevelopment of the website, a sneak preview of which you will see tomorrow. We're also trialing using formats other than the written word to communicate key messages because apparently nobody wants to read anymore, and we're creating a new niche for Headstart as a resource for all newly appointed school leaders. We'll keep you posted of developments through the weekly E-scéal.

But I'll conclude by circling back to the concept of networking which is central to the principle which underpins the work of IPPN – the wisdom of the collective informing the practice of the individual. If Louise was here, she'd remind us that professional networking is not just about meeting new people; it's also about maintaining existing relationships.

I know for many of you, the conference gives you a chance to meet up with friends and colleagues that you may not have seen since last year or, at least, not as frequently as you would like. I hope that experience of friendship and collegiality will extend into your local support groups and becomes part of your lived experience throughout the year so that conference is not an oasis,

but merely a staging post on a journey to more effective, sustainable leadership.

Bainigí taitneamh as an cúpla lá agus go n-eirí go geal libh.

ENDS