

Catriona O'Reilly, Chair, IPPN

Launch of 25 Years of IPPN

IPPN Deputy Principals' Conference, 14th February 2025

Dia daoibh a chairde uilig. Is cúis onóra dom bheith os comhair daoibh um thráthnóna chun tús a chur le bliain an-speisialta d'IPPN. 2025 is an opportunity for us to celebrate the past, reflect on the present and to plan for the future. 25 years ago this week, on 10th February 2000, the Irish Primary Principals' Network was formally launched at an event in Dublin Castle by the then Minister for Education, Michael Woods.

It was a seminal moment for school leadership as the reality and context in which leadership was practised at that time was fundamentally different to our experience today. While the role may have been less complex 25 years ago, school leaders often felt completely isolated, with no support from anyone outside the school community, no sharing of resources across schools, no support groups, no networking email support, no EducationPosts.ie or TextaParent, no professional learning, no mentoring, no coaching, and of course no IPPN! For the first time, with the recognition of IPPN as an official partner in education, a connection was made at system level between the importance of school leadership and improved outcomes for children. The significance of that moment cannot be underestimated.

As a school leader who was appointed when IPPN was well established, I certainly benefitted from the hard work, selfless commitment and meticulous planning of all those who brought IPPN into being and I am personally very

grateful for all that has been done since February 2000 to create the organisation we can be proud of today. The seeds of what became IPPN were sown in Cork, in 1995 by a courageous group of school leaders who sought solutions to the myriad issues they faced on a daily basis. While the idea of school leaders supporting each other wasn't entirely new - Kilkenny city has a group which has been meeting regularly for over 40 years - those seeds sown in Cork in 1995 became a sapling national movement in 2000.

The IPPN executive committee back in 2000, and the interim committee that preceded it, were comprised of a small but incredibly dedicated group, who realised that grand launches were one thing, but to get things up and running properly and to attract members, they had to hit the road to make it happen. Meetings were arranged for every county and, while a number of people were at some of these gatherings, Jim Hayes (our founding President) and Seán Cottrell (our first CEO) were at most of them together, and every meeting had at least one of them in attendance. It is important to point out that at the time, both Jim and Seán were full-time school leaders so those trips around the country took place after school, sometimes three or four days a week and I am reliably informed that our two intrepid pioneers were sustained by a copious supply of chocolate, crisps and two very understanding wives! Today, with more than 3000 member schools, which accounts for the vast majority of primary Principals and Deputy Principals in Ireland, that foundational work has been well rewarded.

I pay tribute to Jim, to Seán and to all who supported, encouraged and ensured the development of IPPN along the way and I am reminded of a phrase that I

read recently – ‘Legacies are built by those who see beyond’. Jim is here with us today, as are past presidents:

- Virginia O’Mahony, who succeeded Jim and served from 2003 to 2005,
- Tomás Ó Slatara, who served from 2005 to 2007,
- Larry Fleming, who served from 2007 to 2009,
- Pat Goff, who served from 2009 to 2011,
- Maria Doyle, who served from 2017 to 2019
- Damian White, our pandemic president, who served from 2019 to 2021,
- Brian O’Doherty, who served from 2021 to 2023
- and of course, our incoming president, Deirdre Kelly.

Past, present and future.

We are indebted to all those who have served IPPN over the past 25 years, whether as president, on the Executive or Board of Directors as it is now known, on the National Council, on county committees, and a special word of thanks to those who have quietly and consistently provided so much collegial support at a local level.

There is no doubt that the generosity of school leaders in giving their time and experience has been invaluable in the development of IPPN. However, that, in itself, would not have been enough to ensure the success of the organisation and its emergence as the ‘go to’ source of information on school leadership, not only for members but for stakeholders. Everything IPPN does, whether it is the development and delivery of an excellent suite of Supports and Services to members, or patient, consistent advocacy for sustainable school leadership, is enabled by the expertise, professionalism, dedication and passionate service of IPPN’s staff to school leaders. On your behalf and on behalf of the Board of

Directors, I thank each and every one of IPPN's staff members, particularly those who have stuck with us for more than 20 years!

In its 25-year history, only two people have served as CEO of the organisation. Seán Cottrell and Páirc Clerkin, in their turn, have nurtured and sustained the development of IPPN through their vision, their tireless commitment, their authenticity and their integrity. There is little doubt that they should both be immensely proud of what they have achieved. We have spoken often about the need for shared leadership in our schools. IPPN has modelled that concept over the years through the appointment of Assistant Directors and Deputy CEOs, Virginia O'Mahony, Pat Goff and Brian O'Doherty. I know that Seán and Páirc appreciate the benefit of having such supportive co-leaders with whom to share the journey. Thank you all and we wish Páirc and Brian continued success with the work.

The IPPN Roadshow, which Páirc spoke about this morning, is a key part of the 25 Years of IPPN celebrations. Meeting members in every county from January to October, creates an opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved, to share IPPN's most recently developed resources to support school leaders, as well as looking at what has yet to be delivered. It is no accident that the 2025 Roadshow mirrors those early road trips undertaken by Jim and Seán, but I sincerely hope that Páirc, Louise, Dónal and Damian are existing on more than packets of crisps and chocolate bars!

In celebrating our 25th Anniversary, throughout the year you will see video clips in E-scéal of interviews with all our IPPN Presidents. These videos will provide us with a rich oral history of IPPN to treasure in the years ahead and will add to an

already impressive archive which is stored both in hard copy and in digital format. In discussing the 25th Anniversary of IPPN with some of our Past Presidents, one of them quoted Dag Hammarskjöld: *'Be grateful as your deeds become less and less associated with your name, as your feet ever more lightly tread the earth.'* While that speaks to the sincerity of our founding members in thinking of others rather than themselves, we want you to know that IPPN will always associate their names with the support, inspiration, and encouragement of school leaders.

This year, there will also be a special section in each issue of Leadership+ and you will have seen the first one featuring all 12 presidents on the front cover, over the past couple of weeks.

Later in 2025, we will issue an ePublication, setting out all the milestones and achievements of the past 25 years and including inputs from key people who have shaped and benefitted from IPPN's work over that time.

This anniversary year is not just an opportunity to reflect on the past. It is also an opportunity to look at the present and to hear the views of members about current Supports and Services. I am sure that you have all read the report of the recent review of Supports and Services, to which more than 1500 school leaders contributed.

We are also looking towards shaping the future of IPPN, and to that end, later this year, our new strategic plan for the period 2026 to 2030 will be developed and published. I encourage you to take the opportunity to contribute to that

plan, which will of course build on the 2021-2025 strategic priorities that are currently being progressed.

Back in 2010, *tar éis deich mbliana ag fás*, when the beautiful purpose-built National Support Office was officially opened, Jim Hayes and Seán Cottrell planted a young silver birch tree outside the office. It was about 10 feet tall at that time. Today it is taller than the building itself – probably 25 feet! - with strong roots, and taking shape to become an ever stronger, healthier tree in the years to come. Much like IPPN itself...

The previous Secretary General of the Department of Education, Seán Ó Foghlú, used to say that if IPPN didn't exist, the Department would have to invent it, and it wouldn't do as good a job! IPPN is now an organisation that is recognised and respected not only nationally, but internationally, and it is influencing the thinking around school leadership both in Europe and worldwide. However, while the leadership context may have changed in Ireland since IPPN's foundation in 2000, real challenges endure for school leaders, and they compromise our effectiveness and the sustainability of our roles. As we plan and prepare for the next 25 years, IPPN renews its commitment to face those challenges together, as a network of professionals dedicated to doing our best for the children in our schools. And we do so because, in the past, the present and into the future, leadership matters.

Go raibh maith agaibh.