

Gerry Murphy Speech IPPN Conference 2012

Fellow Principals and invited guests, as President of IPPN, cuirim fearadh na fáilte, ó chroí, romhaibh uilig anseo inniú le freastal ar Chomhdháil Bhliantúil IPPN 2012. It is my very great pleasure this evening to welcome you to Citywest and to our 12th annual IPPN Conference. A particular céad míle fáilte to the Newly Appointed Principals as you begin your journey of leadership in your schools. A warm welcome also to our special guests from Canada, the North of Ireland and indeed to all of you as Principals who have travelled from near and far to join us for our conference. Tá súil agam go mbainfidh sibh taitneamh agus tairbhe as na laethanta seo i rith na Comhdhála.

The theme of this year's conference is 'Forging a Future'. It is our collective responsibility – as the leaders of Irish primary schools – to ensure that all the children in our care have equal access to quality teaching and learning in our schools. The future society we forge for them must have at its core a sense of self-worth, community, inclusion, creativity, equality, justice and respect. The challenge before us is to forge a sense of pride in who we are, and to inspire real hope for the future for children who depend on us and for colleagues back in our schools.

It has been my pleasure to have witnessed positive, proactive leadership on two watershed occasions within this last month. I was with the Principals, parents and community leaders from Tallaght, Dublin 1, Dublin 8, Waterford agus muintir na scoileanna Gaeltachta in Dáil Éireann last Wednesday week. That night, we witnessed the beginnings of Múintir na hÉireann getting off their knees to fight for their children. I was privileged also to have been in Dunmanway on Monday last week when the community of West Cork sought the right of their children to attend the 2, 3 and 4 teacher schools serving their communities since before Famine Times. I congratulate those schools and community leaders, many of you are here this evening, who have lit the torch of hope in Disadvantaged and Rural communities. DEIS and smaller schools share one and the same issue – that of cherishing all the children of our nation equally.

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It's important to acknowledge also that there are many other issues facing school leaders at this time – in special schools, gaelscoileanna, mainstream schools, in fact in all our schools. These are indeed difficult times for many of you, and I fully empathise with what you are facing in your schools. I have been a Principal for 32 years and I know that many of your schools may have lost, or may be under threat to lose teachers and SNAs. In my own school, we have lost 8 teachers and 3 SNAs. It was one of the most difficult times in my role as school leader – telling someone they have lost their job is never easy, nor is dealing with the educational disadvantage it creates for children whose future we are trying to forge.

The job of school Principal seems to be getting more and more challenging. In most schools, staff morale has taken a further hit over the past 12 months. IPPN is very well aware of this and will continue to inform, challenge, and support Principals, as we have always done. Those of you who were appointed as Principals since 2000 will not really be aware of life before IPPN was formed, with all the supports and services that are now available. Didn't Tony Healy catch this contrast so well in his inspiring e-mail on networking last week? Maith thú Tony!

I can identify with Tony as I too was born in the middle of the last century, in my case into a farming family that had worked the land in County Louth since the 1760s. I went to the local 2-teacher all-boys national school in a building that had not changed very much since the 1830s; the concept of a room temperature above 16 degrees Celsius was still in the future. Each of my teachers, one of them a teaching Principal, lit a fire for learning that still burns brightly today. Like many others at that time, my parents had left school by the age of fourteen, so education was by no means a given for me.

There are Principals here today, working in schools of similar size who, according to the Department of Education and Skills, have to 'consider their positions'. I wonder at what age or at what point I would have exited the education system had economists like Colm McCarthy conducted a value for money audit at the end of the frugal '50s on that 2-teacher school in Knockbridge in Co. Louth? I can tell the Minister that we have 'considered our position' and that there are alternatives to the approach being taken by his department. We identified these alternatives using national and international research in our IPPN publication

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'The Future of Smaller Schools and Teaching Principalship'. There will be more on this from Seán tomorrow.

In 1972, I was let loose as a newly-qualified teacher on one of the eight 6th classes in Scoil Mhuire, De La Salle, in Ballyfermot, a fantastic working class suburb in Dublin. The changes that have come about since then have been monumental and, for the most part, positive. Our schools today are safe havens for children, some of whom need such a sanctuary, coming from families reeling from the effects of drug and alcohol abuse, and the ever-expanding poverty trap that stalks our land. I survived and thrived in Ballyfermot because of the support of a caring Principal and colleagues.

Training the school Gaelic football team helped me develop basic management skills, such as planning, training and coaching reluctant players to embrace change and engaging with parents of talented, but demotivated players. The absence of appropriate training and supports meant that these skills were picked up on the side-line rather than in a Professional Development event like this today. Our Senior Cup victory in 1976 highlighted to me the importance of celebrating success for students, staff, parents and community, which is vital for all schools – 'Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí', is an old Irish proverb which, for the overseas guests among you, means '*praise the young and they will flourish*' ... That thinking reflects what IPPN stands for but more than a decade ago that was something each of us had to work out for ourselves. By the way, it was great as a Louth man to stand on the hallowed turf in Croke Park on a Final Day supporting the winning team. 'An rud is annamh is iontaí'.

A few years after that memorable day, I became Principal of a new school, St Joseph's National School, in Dundalk. There were a number of things that helped me as a school leader in the early days. We were very lucky to have a truly enlightened Chairperson who encouraged and advised us to visit parents and meet with them in their homes. We forged strong links with parents and the community and it gave me a first-hand insight into what disadvantage actually means. I'll always remember the welcome we received from people who appreciated the efforts we made on behalf of their children. We all have hope for our children's futures, but experience has taught me that disadvantage and poverty consistently

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drain that hope. I firmly believe that home, school and community co-operation and intervention are critical to counterbalancing socio-economic disadvantage. We must, as an educational priority, forge a worthwhile future for the children in disadvantaged communities.

Another crucial development for me as a maturing Principal was the more formal training and professional development that became available. Professional development on the integration of Information and Communication Technology into the teaching and learning process was for many their first encounter with Professional Development since Teacher Training Days. I learned so much from the likes of the late Concepta Conaty, who drove the early ideas around Home-School-Community Liaison and Social Inclusion in schools. These programmes created a culture of professional and personal development for those serving disadvantaged communities.

In St Joseph's, as in all DEIS schools, it helped to reinvigorate us as a professional staff. It led to whole school training in 'Discipline for Learning', 'Restorative Practices' and more recently 'Incredible Years' and 'Nurture Group'. These and other significant supports prompted DEIS schools to engage in Literacy and Numeracy initiatives which have emerged as models of best practice. The Education Research Centre's report on their evaluation of DEIS confirms what we all know, that DEIS supports are working. They say 'the differences are statistically significant for both reading and mathematics... at all grade levels'. It is such empirical evidence that will win the day in the current political debate. This debate must accept the need for sustaining current supports and reinstating those supports withdrawn from Traveller and Newcomer children last September.

I had no clear views on school leadership when I started out. By attending conferences like this and hearing the likes of Professor Michael Fullan, whom we will hear from tomorrow, I was inspired to think more deeply about what is really important in our role. His insights into what he calls the '*moral imperative*' of '*raising the bar and closing the gap*' between the highest and lowest achievers in education, '*irrespective of background*', resonated very strongly with me. I suspect this is the reason most of us chose a profession that gives us

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the daily privilege of leading learning by improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for children in our care.

It was the word 'Network' that most appealed to me when I became a member of IPPN – school leaders collaborating and working together to help each other and their schools to develop. Fellow Principals became colleagues rather than competitors. I can't emphasise enough to you what it means to be part of a local support group of Principals. These groups are the foundation stones of IPPN as a network.

My leadership skills were helped along by my predecessor Pat Goff and those who came before him, just as his were influenced by his predecessors. The voluntary efforts of many National Committee and Executive members over the years have also steered the ship on a straight course. And where would we be without our amazing and superbly efficient Support Office Staff?

The Network has always sought to ensure that children are at the centre of every idea, that the 'moral imperative' is the focus for key educational reform. Principals are advocates for children and IPPN does the same for Principals. As an advocate and education partner, IPPN will encourage you to promote the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and to use the self-evaluation model and other reform initiatives as they emerge. But we will also continue to remind those who develop such programmes that the imposition of top-down only reform from the Department on schools *will not work*. Research indicates that unless education reform is led in the school, *it will not work*.

A good working relationship between all education stakeholders is vital. Let's remember also to listen to those not directly involved in education provision, such as Lord Puttnam, and other leaders. Such groups can advise on the world of work our children will inhabit in forging their own futures. Over these three days you will have some time and space to think and recharge the batteries. You will have the opportunity to participate in 30 seminars and you will hear from 6 keynote speakers. It is a wonderful opportunity, for us as school leaders, over these three days, to celebrate our achievements, share our concerns and

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focus on finding solutions to our problems. IPPN will continue to be a solution driven network, serving your professional needs.

Amach anseo, nuair a bheidh ceisteanna móra eile le socrú ag príomhoidí bunscoile na tíre:
– cibé acu scoileanna gaeltachta, galltachta, gaelscoileanna, scoileanna le beirt oide nó beirt is fiche, scoileanna aonchreidmheacha, ilchreidmheacha, neamh-shainchreidmheacha nó scoileanna speisialta iad, amharcaidh muid orthu le chéile.

Together we will continue forging a future for those who matter most – all of our children.
“Ní neart go cur le chéile”. Go raibh maith agaibh as éisteacht liom agus ádh mór oraibh uilig don chuid eile den chomhdháil.

ENDS