

Seán Cottrell Speech IPPN Conference 2012

Good morning everybody. I feel very privileged to have the opportunity to share my thoughts with you this morning. One thousand, one hundred and forty-seven of you have travelled from near and far, representing all counties here today. I thank the Department of Education for providing substitute cover which enables Teaching Principals, six hundred of you are here today, to have equal access as school leaders to professional development. I'd also like to add my own gratitude to Minister Quinn for addressing us earlier.

The Taoiseach said he would evaluate his ministers on an ongoing basis. Always eager to help, IPPN is preparing an early draft for the Taoiseach of Minister Quinn's standardised report card. It covers a broad range of criteria to prevent the Minister from 'working to the test'.

Starting with the positive, Minister, you have kept your promise to give Teaching Principals the option of taking on learning support and resource teaching roles where the roles exist and the Teaching Principal wishes to take them on. You are the first Minister to listen to IPPN about this important change for Teaching Principals. But allowing Principals to combine resource and learning support hours with administration days in schools with 4 teachers or less, would make such a difference.

You have also kept your promise in relation to providing greater autonomy to Principals and boards of management in the spending of financial resources. It is such a shame that this is happening at a time when grant aid is being cut.

Another positive development is that schools will be able to avail of professional advice from the new education and training boards, formerly the VECs, which will have a role in providing professional advice regarding building projects, maintenance, finance, as well as legal and human resource matters.

IPPN has lobbied the Department for several years to provide high quality advice for Principals on a local basis. However the quality of this proposed service remains to be seen.

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Perhaps one of the Minister's biggest achievements in his first year is the work of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism. We look forward to Professor Coolahan's report in due course.

Doing well so far Minister, however I am afraid that's the end of the good news. While you are making progress in a number of important areas, unfortunately you have failed to protect the most vulnerable children in primary education from Mr Chopra and his troika friends. You have been honest with us about the state of our nation's finances and the government's rationale for education cutbacks. That may be good management, but it's not leadership. There is no vision, let alone hope that there will be life after debt, however you spell it.

I haven't heard any Minister or the Taoiseach give any commitment to reversing these cuts once the economy improves. Minister, I challenge you this morning to unequivocally give your political and personal commitment to prioritizing the restoration of funding to primary education, once finances permit. I appeal to your unquestioned passion for education to start now by reversing the cuts to DEIS, small schools and special needs. Restoring equitable levels of staffing and funding to all DEIS schools is essential. Just as independent research shows, that DEIS is proving to be a success, the resources that made it successful are being removed. This is not DEIS... This is daft.

Inclusion of children with special needs has worked extraordinarily well since the late 90s because a scaffolding of resources was put in place to support all pupils in the classroom. Unfortunately, it is now like watching a game of Jenga, where the blocks are being removed one by one. Who will take responsibility when it all falls apart? The bottom line is... since the Budget I haven't met a single Principal or teacher who would not support the prioritisation of the most vulnerable children. There are fairer ways of achieving the required savings.

Small schools are still in budget shock. The strategy of annually increasing class size, making teaching and learning gradually more difficult, is like slow-boiling a lobster from cold water. The absence of any vision for small schools other than amalgamations and closures demonstrates a lack of understanding of the importance of small schools and the role they play in rural Ireland.

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I would hazard a guess that many of you here today were educated in multi-grade classrooms in small schools.

Since our foundation in 2000, IPPN has been a strong advocate for small schools. Our policy has been, and continues to be, that small schools are proven to be educationally viable. If small schools close, hundreds of rural communities will disappear. Other minority communities such as Church of Ireland schools, in rural and urban settings, will be severely affected.

Back in 2005, IPPN anticipated pressure on small schools. Following extensive research, we published *'Breacadh Ré Nua do Scoileanna Bheaga – New Horizons for Smaller Schools'*. It detailed the challenges ahead, but more importantly outlined a variety of alternative models other than forced amalgamations and closures.

Sadly, small schools are now being coerced into amalgamations, because the Department sees small schools as being too numerous to communicate with and too small to be financially viable. Minister, if it weren't for our parents, who provide approximately one third of the running costs of primary schools, your department would have three thousand three hundred financially unviable schools. Most of the very small schools are physically in good condition, because local community pride has played a major role.

University Presidents are a powerful lobby in seeking to increase their funding. Funnily enough, I can't ever recall being invited to a university cake sale. There is certainly an argument to be made that the governance structures of small schools need revision, and that certain economies of scale can be made. IPPN has researched how primary education is provided in remote areas of Northern Sweden, Queensland, Catalonia and Nova Scotia. A common feature in all these areas was the centralisation of management and administration, while retaining the teaching and learning in the existing schools.

In an Irish context, this would mean that a cluster of two or three very small schools would agree to work over a number of years towards a formal federation. The physical buildings would not be touched. There would be one board of management, one budget, one staff, a full-time shared administrator, a full-time shared caretaker and one

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administrative Principal. There would be one roll number and one point of contact for the DES and other agencies. These changes would be phased in over an agreed timeframe. Such change might require a carrot and stick approach. However, the Department's approach seems to be all stick and no carrot. The main advantage of this option is that the aspects of the school that matter most to parents are retained and those that matter least are centralised.

This actually works; we have seen it in action.

We must learn from research and indeed from the real experiences of other countries.

Minister, IPPN is eager to work with you to further develop the strongest asset in our primary schools – the caliber of our teachers. The most important part of the process is to select the right people from the outset. The methodologies used to select our student teachers require urgent attention. Principals feel that there is also much room for improvement to all the existing teacher training programmes. While private sector online programmes have many excellent features, it raises the question of whether a programme which is delivered primarily online can match the traditional campus-based, full-time student experience in the formation of a primary teacher.

Having listened to David Puttnam last night, I believe that we must take a radical look at how we are preparing our future teachers. It seems that student teachers were not prepared adequately, on time, for some new developments in schools, for example, the implementation of the revised curriculum. Similarly, the use of ICT as a teaching and learning tool was in place in many schools for several years before the colleges of education got on board the digital train. Principals report that newly-qualified teachers are well prepared to teach most aspects of the revised primary curriculum. However, Principals also state that newly-qualified teachers have difficulty:

- Communicating effectively with parents
- Teaching children with special educational needs and
- Addressing challenging behaviour.

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These interpersonal and intrapersonal skills – the emotional intelligence skills – should be pre-requisites for all teachers. Within the additional scope of the four-year BEd, I believe it is imperative that personal development becomes an integral part of initial teacher education. It cannot be left to the induction process or to schools that are already overloaded.

Understanding pathways to learning and the development of key skills in the classroom require much more focus in the colleges. In addition, the four-year BEd itself presents a serious challenge for schools. The challenge of facilitating the placement of student teachers for longer periods of teaching practice cannot be underestimated. Schools and colleges of education share a collective responsibility to make teacher placement work. The directors of teaching practice in all colleges must agree on a single strategy in arranging school placements for students.

They must take on board the fact that:

- Seven out of ten Principals are full-time teachers
- Multi-grade teaching is now the norm
- All classrooms have children with special educational and language needs and
- That schools are operating with diminishing staff numbers and diminishing resources.

New graduates are the lifeblood of many schools. It is crucial that their induction into teaching and learning is managed correctly. Teaching Principals tell us that the induction of new teachers is extremely difficult owing to their own full-time teaching role.

Mentoring and inducting new teachers cannot be left to chance. Serious consideration must be given to providing additional release time for teaching Principals to carry out this essential leadership task. It also begs the question why no such induction programme exists for Newly Appointed Principals.

Probation is an important final quality check. It must not be lessened in any way by shoehorning it into the additional student placement time in schools. Teaching practice cannot be compared with teaching one's own class. The probation of teachers seeking to enter the profession is a matter for the Teaching Council. It's time the Teaching Council

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started spending our €90 in ways that will practically benefit the profession and stop off-loading their responsibilities on our schools.

There are huge challenges ahead. We're not shooting for the stars. We are realists and are aware of our economic situation. The year just gone by has presented a new challenge for schools – children coming from homes that have been turned upside down due to job losses and fear of eviction. These children are acutely aware of what is happening and are terrified inside but trying to maintain a brave face. Minister, we live and work in the urgency of now.

If you and your department are serious about creating a knowledge economy, you must support Principals in our endeavour to raise the standard of education of our pupils, from all backgrounds. Literacy and numeracy cannot be successfully addressed by ignoring the context in which children live and learn.

World-renowned expert in educational improvement, Professor Michael Fullan, identifies the pivotal role that school leaders play in implementing and sustaining meaningful change. As he says... 'there are no examples of school-wide success without effective school leadership, all examples of school failure include weak and ineffective leadership'. Since IPPN was founded as a professional body, we have focused our efforts on helping school leaders to become more effective, in pursuit of one simple goal – to improve the quality of primary education for all children.

Even in this time of scarcity, the department will get better value for money by supporting Principals, whose influence on teachers cannot be underestimated. I have said before that Principals are, by nature, hardcore optimists. This optimism must have been what Napoleon had in mind when he said that '*A leader is a dealer in hope*'.

Remember you have the power to choose which attitude you take. '*Life is 10% of what happens to us and 90% of how we react to it*'.

When you choose to react positively, you inspire those around you. Many of you do not realise how influential you actually are. You lead so many children and teachers through their most formative years. They may not remember all that you taught them, but they

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will remember how you treated them and what you stood for as a Principal. There are children in your schools who have no one else to fight for what they deserve. The reality is that you are often the only advocates for these children.

Many of you here are new Principals, more of you are about to retire. Whatever stage you are at in your career, try to visualise your own 'end of career report card'. What would you like to see on that? These are the things that are worth thinking about, especially now when times are hard. There is no greater service you can give than to show leadership when it is easier to go with the flow – but remember; only dead fish go with the flow! It takes great courage to show leadership in these tough times, but together our Network will provide the support and collegiality that we all need to stand up and be counted.

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