

IPPN CEO Páirc Clerkin
Launch of UNESCO GEM Report
Friday 11th April 2025, INEW Conference

As CEO of IPPN, the professional body for primary school leaders in Ireland, it is a great privilege to have the opportunity of sharing some perspectives with you today at this, the Irish Launch of the 2024/25 GEM Report focusing on leadership in education.

We warmly welcome the publication of the report. We welcome its recognition of the importance of school leadership as a key lever of educational reform and a determinant of improved outcomes for children. We welcome its identification of the issues that are constraining leadership effectiveness and undermining its sustainability. But most of all, we welcome the fact that the key findings contained within the report align perfectly with our own research findings and add weight to the advocacy we are undertaking to enhance leadership capacity, leadership effectiveness and the sustainability of school leadership roles in Ireland.

For the last 25 years, IPPN has been working to empower school leaders to be as effective as they can be in their roles. It is our sole purpose and we do it because we know that leadership matters. Decades of national and international research have established the inextricable links between leadership effectiveness, school effectiveness and outcomes for students. We all know and accept this so it should be a system imperative that the conducive conditions are created for school leadership to flourish, as the ultimate beneficiaries will be the children in our classrooms.

Our daily engagement with primary school leaders, through the supports and services we offer, has highlighted an increasing sense of challenge, frustration and disillusionment—a sense that they are not being given the chance to do the job they signed up to do. The intensity of that sense of frustration and disillusionment has noticeably increased in recent years and prompted IPPN to undertake our Sustainable Leadership project.

The project sought to establish why so many who are tasked with one of the most strategically important roles in education are struggling and what can be done to enhance their experience of the practice of leadership.

To achieve this we undertook an evidence informed analysis of the current reality of primary school leadership and there were four elements to the evidence base we established

- the extent of school leaders' workload
- the nature of that workload
- its impact on leadership effectiveness and sustainability and
- its impact on the health and well-being of school leaders.

Much like education systems in jurisdictions all around the world, Irish policy-makers have long since recognised the importance of the role in terms of effecting reform and improvement. This has led to a leveraging of the role and an inevitable and inexorable increase in workload. Every new education circular or policy initiative or set of guidelines that issues, identifies the particular tasks and responsibilities that fall to school leaders to ensure their effective implementation.

As part of our analysis, we logged the school leadership tasks and responsibilities detailed in all such documents, dating back to 2016. In total, 162 documents were reviewed and our analysis revealed a predictable but dizzying year-on-year expansion of the role.

But we went one step further and analysed the nature of those tasks and responsibilities. What we discovered was that all 162 documents had tasks and responsibilities that were administrative or bureaucratic in nature but fewer than 25% of them had tasks and responsibilities relating to the leadership of teaching and learning. In other words, school leaders are consistently diverted from focusing on their core purpose.

What effect do you think this is having on the sustainability of their leadership roles? Well in each of the last 3 years we have asked school leaders to give a rating out of 10 as to how sustainable their roles are. Late last year, around the time of the publication of the GEM report, a sample of over 1000 Irish primary principals gave a mean sustainability rating of 3.24 out of 10 for their roles.

Within that sample we have a cohort of teaching principals. 54% of Irish primary principals are teaching principals, which means that four days a week they have full-time teaching duties, and one day a week to fulfil their leadership responsibilities. They currently rate the sustainability of their roles at 2.88 out of 10 which is little wonder, given the lack of discrete time for leadership afforded to them.

And a staggering 97% of those 1000+ primary school leaders told us that the thing that most undermines their effectiveness and the sustainability of their roles is the amount of stuff they have to do that has absolutely nothing to do with teaching and learning.

The final piece of our evidence jigsaw was undertaken in partnership with our sister organisation at post-primary level – the National Association of Principals and Deputies (NAPD). To evaluate the impact of the experience of the practice of leadership on the health and well-being of Irish school leaders, we commissioned a 3-year, independent longitudinal study.

The data gleaned from this research revealed that the scores for Irish primary school leaders for burnout, stress, depressive symptoms and sleep disorders were either double

or more than double those of the healthy working population. The most elevated score year on year is for burnout.

It is also interesting to note that the top two sources of stress remained constant over the three-year period and they were sheer quantity of work and lack of time to focus on teaching and learning so you can see the consistency and alignment across the evidence base.

So it is reasonable to conclude that not being given the chance to do the job they signed up to do is limiting the effectiveness of school leaders, undermining the sustainability of their roles and compromising their health and wellbeing. Even if we are indifferent to the impact on the person of the leader, we should be very concerned about the impact on their effectiveness as this has real and measurable consequences for children.

The 2024 GEM report identifies that very dynamic and highlights that this is the reality in which school leaders around the world are operating. Again, this is directly in keeping with IPPN's experience as we are members of the International Confederation of Principals which affords us the opportunity of engaging with similar organisations to ourselves in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Oceania and closer to home in Europe.

And what we have discovered is that the experience of the practice of school leadership around the world is universal. Despite the fact that education systems provide differing levels of infrastructural and financial support for leadership, school leaders around the world cite the same absence of role clarity and the same lack of time to focus on teaching and learning as significant factors that limit their effectiveness.

We all know that effective teachers create an environment and culture within their classrooms that empowers student agency. Similarly, effective school leaders create an environment in their schools that empowers teacher agency. So why wouldn't we want to create the conducive conditions that would enable leadership agency to flourish?

And what would those conducive conditions be? Well, to empower and facilitate this leadership agency

- there needs to be greater role clarity
- the necessary structures and resources to support the practice of leadership need to be in place
- school leaders need to be able to focus on their core purpose of leading teaching & learning
- and they need greater capacity to share leadership.

If this was the case, it is less likely that the practice of school leadership would have a negative impact on the leader's health & wellbeing and, crucially, the potential of ensuring an inclusive and equitable, quality education for all would be enhanced.

A couple of weeks ago, a highly respected and influential figure in Irish education suggested the establishment of a forum of practitioners, policy-makers and other stakeholders to have a national conversation about school leadership so that we can move the discourse beyond mere sustainable leadership and aspire to the concept of flourishing leadership. In that respect, the publication of the GEM report is timely in that clearly articulates the potential for school leadership to have a transformational impact on school communities and on the lived experience of children.

My predecessor as CEO of IPPN was fond of quoting Napoleon when he said that leaders are dealers in hope. But school leaders need also to be given hope that their agency will be empowered so that they might better realise the vision, ambitions and aspirations they have for their school communities. The publication of the GEM report is the catalyst for initiating that national and international conversation about school leadership and it's a conversation in which IPPN is very happy to participate.

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