



Response to Consultation Documents

A Professional Learning Continuum  
for School Leadership in the Irish  
Context

and

CSL Quality Assurance Pilot Process

November 2017

## **INTO and School Leadership**

The Irish National Teachers' Organization (INTO) represents over 36,000 teachers in the Republic of Ireland, including over 6,200 principals and deputy principals. School leadership is a key concern of INTO, and resolutions on school leadership are considered at each Annual Congress, and leadership matters are on the agenda at each meeting of the Central Executive Committee (CEC). Within the structures of INTO, the INTO Principals' and Deputy Principals' Committee advises the CEC on issues related to school leadership and organizes a Biennial Consultative Conference. Principals and deputy principals participate at all levels in the Organization, including in Principals' and Deputy Principals' Fora organized at local level. INTO Head Office advises and represents principals and deputy principals on all school related matters. INTO also provides professional development opportunities to school leaders, through online and face to face courses, and through the very successful Principals' Seminar programme.

## **Professional Learning Continuum**

### **Context**

INTO acknowledges the work of the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) in setting out a professional learning continuum is a significant development in supporting school leadership in Ireland. The current approach has developed on an ad hoc basis, and has lacked an underlying philosophy or agreed approach. Further consultation on the overall approach with all the stakeholders on this matter would be of benefit, particularly in light of the fact that teacher unions are not part of the Steering Committee for CSL.

The Consultation paper sets out a number of issues for consideration in the context of current professional learning for school leaders. However, it does not reference other factors which have had a profound influence on professional development for school leaders and which must be addressed if the continuum is to move from vision to reality. These include the historic underfunding of professional development, and the failure to adequately resource it in terms of time and resources. A proper system of release time, with substitute cover is essential to facilitate participation in professional development activities is essential. The need for release time, with substitution, for teaching principals is particularly acute. The already inadequate release time to undertake administrative, leadership and management functions cannot be stretched to facilitate professional development activities also. Teaching principals are already struggling to complete administrative and management functions in the absence of support including ancillary staff and support from Boards of Management.

No amount of training will overcome the inadequacy of pay for principal teachers, and inequality between principals and deputy principals at primary and post primary level. The withdrawal of academic allowances in 2012 has been a significant disincentive to participate in accredited and often expensive

academic courses. The moratorium on appointment to middle management posts in schools has significantly undermined the leadership structures in schools, and has placed undue workload and responsibilities on principals and deputy principals.

### **Continuum as set out**

INTO welcomes the recognition in the continuum of leadership at all levels in schools and acknowledgement of need for professional development at each stage. We acknowledge the need for the identification of and development of leadership attributes of teachers at all stages in their careers, and that all teachers must have opportunities for professional development in this area.

It is vital that there is coherence and clarity of approach, including with the current development phase of Cosán. The approach taken must be coordinated between the various providers of professional development, but in a way that respects the roles and autonomy of the organizations

INTO welcomes the recognition of different forms of learning pathways in including shadowing, mentoring, coaching, internships and exchanges, online and face to face learning, clusters and collaborative groups as well as accredited courses. It will be vital that all of these pathways are supported and resourced. This approach is consistent with, and should be closely aligned to the approach to learning opportunities in Cosán. A framework for the recognition and acknowledgment of school leadership professional development is also required, in accordance with Teaching Council policy in this area.

Teacher leaders –INTO welcomes recognition of the leadership role carried out by teachers who are not recognized in the formal middle management structures in schools. Many teachers at this phase in their career participate in professional development, and it is important that this is recognized and resourced. It is important to acknowledge that not all teacher leaders wish to progress to school leadership positions, and the leadership given at this stage of a teacher’s career should be recognized in itself, and not necessarily just as a pathway to formal leadership roles.

Middle leaders – The moratorium on posts of responsibility has had an enormous impact on the development of school leadership and the career paths of a generation of teachers. The limited restoration of posts announced in Budget 2017 begins the process of rebuilding middle management in schools. The emphasis on shared leadership, as articulated in the 2017 Leadership and Management Circular is welcome. There is an identified need for professional development for middle management post holders, and in particular, opportunities for collaborative professional development for in-school management teams.

### Aspiring School Leaders

INTO notes the approach to professional development for aspiring school leaders adopted in some of the jurisdictions examined by CSL in their

preparation of the continuum. However, the approaches in terms of selection/ recommendation for participation in courses for aspiring school leaders, or a mandatory qualification as a pre-requisite for appointment may not be appropriate in the Irish context.

INTO is opposed to any mandatory qualification for school leadership. We believe that ensuring equality of access to such courses would not be practical in the context of the large number of small schools and their locations in rural areas, often without access to broadband. Recruitment and selection of candidates for aspiring school leaders' courses also implies a mandatory approach. We would be concerned that such an approach might be used as a "gatekeeper" in terms of access to principal/ deputy principalship, diminishing the autonomy of Boards to appoint the best candidate for the post.

It is acknowledged however, that professional development for aspiring school leaders is desirable and beneficial. There is need for increased access to professional development, including but not limited to accredited courses.

#### Newly Appointed Principals and Deputy Principals

A large section of the document is given over to looking at the induction of newly appointed principals and deputy principals. This is welcome and reflects the current provision, which is very well received by newly appointed principals. In particular, the residential modules, formalization of mentoring, and collaborative approaches in the Misneach programme are successful approaches, which should be continued and expanded. Indeed, there is a need to extend the availability of these courses to deputy principals at primary level. We are concerned at the suggestion that induction might not be as extensive in the context of expanded aspiring leaders training.

#### Established School Leaders

INTO recognizes that there is an issue in relation to the coordination of professional development for established school leaders. Some of this arises from the perception of external agencies, such as TUSLA and voluntary bodies, that principals have unlimited time to attend courses and information sessions. In many cases the professional development offered to school leaders focuses on system needs, and places further demands on school leaders in terms of the dissemination of information to the wider school community. The needs of schools leaders, in terms of their own development must be to the forefront in the continuum at this point. It is also important that principals and deputy principals have opportunities to learn together, and in this regard, the successful Forbairt programme should be expanded and developed. Supported and funded clusters, where groups of school leaders can identify their own needs, access support and learn collaboratively, have been identified by school leaders as effective in meeting their needs.

System leaders – INTO welcomes the identification of experienced school leaders and system leaders in the continuum. It is vital that experienced leaders are supported and challenged in their roles, both in schools and also in the education

system. This point has often been overlooked, and the contribution that these leaders can bring has been lost. The experienced practitioner voice is critical in leading education policy in Ireland. There is a need for resourcing in terms of time and financial support for teachers who wish to pursue further learning and/or contribute to the system through mentoring, secondments, release time, and opportunities for associateship.

### **Quality Assurance Framework**

INTO acknowledges the need to assure that professional development offered to school leaders is of a high standard and quality. This needs to be balanced with a realistic approach which does not see providers bogged down in unnecessary paper work or bureaucracy. We appreciate the need for a standard approach, but this needs to be one which respects the autonomy and perspectives of individual providers. An overly prescriptive approach will stifle the energy and creativity of providers and in the end result in less effective professional learning.

The application of the quality assurance framework to forms of professional learning such as mentoring/ shadowing/ clusters/collaboration is not clear. The approach seems to be primarily based on structured programmes or courses. Other pathways to learning also need to have access to proper funding and quality assurance. The evaluation of programmes/ activities needs to be done in such a way that it does not become an end in itself.

### **Conclusion**

INTO welcomes the publication of the continuum. Certain aspects of the document require further development, and the worthy aspirations contained in it will come to nothing without adequate commitment of resources from DES to support it.

We look forward to engaging further with the CSL and other stakeholders on this matter.