



# Sustaining School Leadership

Principals' and Deputy Principals' Conference 2021

## *Cothú na Ceannaireachta Scoile*

Comhdháil Chomhairleach do Phríomhoidí agus Leas Phríomhoidí 2021



# Fáilte

Dear Delegate,

We are very aware of the treadmill that school principals and deputies have been on since March 2020. Your tremendous resilience and resourcefulness are a source of pride to those who represent you. Before the pandemic, school leaders faced increased demands for improvement and reform in schools and classrooms in an ever-changing educational landscape. We grappled with this while still reeling from the era of austerity and the negative impact of that era on school leadership, in particular the corrosive moratorium on middle leadership posts and cuts to salaries. But this paled into insignificance compared to what you had to face in the last year and a half. The way you dealt with the fear and uncertainty brought about by COVID-19 and the way you continued to lead your school communities has been truly heroic.

The success of our schools during the pandemic has highlighted the importance of strong school leadership. Everyone now knows the effect school leaders can have on the improvement of teaching and learning and their huge influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions.

It is hard to be a successful school leader. It is harder still to be a sustainable one. Sustainable leaders promote a long-term vision of improvement and pay serious attention to leadership succession. Increased teacher involvement in distributed leadership and collaboration is crucial in schools. The sustainable leadership approach advances a vision of participative leadership for learning in the long term. School leadership has a greater influence on the school community when it is widely distributed.

The INTO has worked this summer to convince political parties of the absolute necessity for the restoration of assistant principalships in Budget 2022. With Budget Day fast approaching, we hope that everyone in your school reminds their TDs next week of our pre-budget campaign – “We can do better”.

When the INTO was negotiating one leadership and management day for every teaching principal and ‘release’ days for deputy principals in larger schools we were conscious of McGivern’s 2015 study of sustainable leadership capacity in Irish primary schools, which reported that nine out of 10 principals said there was not enough time to engage with leading learning in their schools. We must work to ensure that the INTO’s hard won gains for leadership are retained beyond the current public health crisis.

The year ahead will not be easy, but it is important for us to take some time out today to reflect on the post-pandemic future and on how together we can ensure that it is bright. And we look forward to the settlement of the long-standing award to school leaders in four months’ time.

School leaders want to accomplish goals that matter, inspire others to join them in working toward those goals, and leave a legacy after they have gone. We hope that you enjoy participating in the conference and look forward to your assistance as we strive to ensure that the system in which school leaders do their work makes sustainability a priority.

Yours sincerely,



Joe McKeown  
INTO President



John Boyle  
INTO General Secretary



# General information

## Registering for the conference on InEvent

To participate in the Principals' and Deputy Principals' Conference, you will need to register on the InEvent platform, on which the conference will be hosted. If you have been nominated as a delegate by your district, you will receive an email inviting you to register for InEvent. Please note that this email will come from an @ineventmail.com email address, rather than an INTO email address. You must open the email and fill in the required details. When you have filled in your details and clicked 'register' you will be sent a unique link that will allow you to access the conference.

## Test your access

We recommend that you test that you can access the InEvent platform in advance of the conference. The platform will be available to access from Wednesday, 29 September. If you are having difficulty accessing the platform, please email techpdpconference@into.ie and our IT team will assist you in getting connected.

## Best internet browser to use

The platform will run via the web browser on your computer/device. For the best experience, you should use Google Chrome (Mac/PC) to access the conference. Other compatible browsers are:

- Firefox (Mac/PC) 44 or newer (recommended alternative)
- Safari (Mac) 11 or newer (recommended alternative)
- Chrome (Android) 80 or newer
- Safari (iOS) 11 or later.

Please note that Internet Explorer is not compatible. If you use Internet Explorer, you should download another browser before the conference starts to avoid issues.

## Virtual Lobby

Your unique link will bring you to the conference 'virtual lobby' where you should see the day's sessions laid out on the left side of the page. A video guide to the platform will be available at the top right of the screen and you should watch this before the conference starts to help familiarise yourself with the platform. You enter a session by clicking on it and leave it by selecting 'back to lobby' in the top left of the screen when you are in the session. We recommend that you log on to the platform in advance of 10 am on Friday, 1 October.

## Conference email address

A dedicated email address is available for any queries you may have prior to and during the conference. The email address is pdpconference@into.ie.

## Trade stands and tech support

You can visit our trade exhibitors' virtual stands in the top right of the lobby. Our IT team will be on hand once the conference starts to assist you with any technical issues you might have once on the platform. (For example, if your speakers or microphone are not working). For technical support during the conference email techpdpconference@into.ie.

## Communication with delegates

We encourage delegates to regularly check their emails for information about the conference. Further information and updates will be available on the conference page which can be found at: <https://bit.ly/PDCCConference>.

## INTO communication policy

Please be advised that photography, videography and/or live streaming will be taking place at this event. These materials may be used by the INTO and included in publications, media materials, promotional materials, digital platforms and, social platforms. If you do not wish for the INTO to use your image, please contact us to inform us. The INTO can then take reasonable steps to comply with your wishes.

## Absence from school

The Department of Education has given approval for leave of absence for delegates to attend the conference. A copy of the correspondence is available on the 'PDP Conference' page on the INTO website. However, substitute cover is not available.

## Conference evaluation

Delegates will be contacted after the conference with a link to a short online questionnaire, for the purposes of evaluating the online conference.

## Workshops

All workshops apart from one will have a maximum of 50 participants. By the time you receive this conference booklet you should already have received an email with the list of workshops, which requested you to submit your choices. If you have not already done so, we request that you submit your choices in advance of the conference. We encourage delegates to participate, where possible, in these workshops. Further instruction on how to participate and contribute will be provided at the start of the workshop. Any resources available will be uploaded to the conference homepage afterwards. Please note that the workshops will not be recorded.





# Clár

9 am	Visit trade stands and tech support open	11.30 am	Break
10 am	Conference opening <i>Joe McKeown, INTO President</i> <i>John Boyle, General Secretary</i> <i>David O'Sullivan, Assistant General Secretary</i>	11.45 am	First workshop (see pg 5)
10.20 am	Presentation of research/ background paper <i>Gerard O'Donoghue/Brid Finnegan</i>	12.35 pm	Feedback from the discussion groups
10.40 am	Discussion groups	12.40 pm	Lunch break
		1.40 pm	Second workshop (see pg 5)
		2.30 pm	Keynote speaker <i>Declan Coyle, Andec Communications</i>
		3.30pm	Conference closing

## Discussion groups

*10.40-11.30 am*

The discussion groups will give principals and deputy principals an opportunity to give their views and opinions on the important theme of Sustaining School Leadership. All discussion groups will consider questions on the theme. The discussion will be facilitated by members of the Principals' and Deputy Principals' Committee.

There are six discussion rooms on the InEvent platform. Please check your email to find your assigned discussion group. We encourage delegates to participate in and contribute to these important group discussions. Further instruction on how to participate and contribute will be provided on the day of the conference. Please note that the discussion groups will not be recorded.

## Exhibitors

A number of exhibitors will be in attendance. We encourage you to visit these prior to the conference and during your breaks:

- /// Comhar Linn
- /// Cornmarket
- /// Edco
- /// EDUC Mortgages
- /// EMU ink
- /// Folens
- /// Gill
- /// Global Citizenship School
- /// INTO LGBT Teachers' Group
- /// Marsh Ireland
- /// Membership Plus
- /// Prim Ed
- /// Wriggle Learning
- /// VHI

## INTO Principals' and Deputy Principals' Committee

The INTO Principals' and Deputy Principals' Committee (PDC) was established in 2005 to advise the CEC on matters relevant to principal and deputy principal teachers. The PDC consists of one principal or deputy principal from each of the 16 INTO districts, each elected for a three-year term. The committee meets five times a year. Since its establishment, the PDC has considered a wide range of matters relevant to school leadership, including workload, in-school

management, release time for teaching principals, and the outstanding payment of the benchmarking award for principals and deputy principals. The committee has hosted consultative conferences on a biennial basis, including discussion groups, workshops and a range of interesting keynote speakers. This is the first virtual conference to be hosted by the PDC. Although being held remotely, the PDC looks forward to welcoming you to the conference and hearing your views.



# Workshops

Morning, 11.45 am and afternoon, 1.40 pm (the morning workshop is available again in the afternoon). These workshops are on a first come, first served basis and must be booked prior to 1 October. Each delegate and guest received an email registration link from the INTO, inviting them to pick their two workshops and afterwards received an email to confirm their choices. If you have did not receive an email please contact us on [pdpcconference@into.ie](mailto:pdpcconference@into.ie).

## **SUSTAINED WELLNESS FOR THE SCHOOL LEADER – REST, RECOVER, RESTORE AND RENEW**

### **ANN-MARIE IRELAND – BREATHING SPACE IRELAND**

A safe, restful space for the school leader to recover and restore energy, to recalibrate thoughts and to reflect upon the many ways that simple daily practices can contribute to sustained well-being even within these challenging times. Best practice in wellness for the school leader will be explored within this space in a realistic and practical manner for ease of transition into school and personal life. The school leader embodies a powerful role requiring them to be a guiding light for others at all times. However, they cannot possibly light the way for others or indeed for themselves to enjoy their own life if they are not tending to their own needs first. This space addresses those needs and is best experienced in a quiet, comfortable space, if possible.

## **LEADING AND SUSTAINING CURRICULUM CHANGE - THE DRAFT PRIMARY CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK**

### **DR PATRICK SULLIVAN, DR JACQUELINE FALLON AND DR DEREK GRANT – NCCA**

Since the introduction of the *Primary School Curriculum* in 1999, the extent and pace of change is striking. Diverse classrooms, ever-increasing and changing demands of the primary school, policy changes and new findings from research on teaching, learning and assessment combine to create both a need and an opportunity to revisit the primary curriculum as a whole and to ask key questions:

- What is the purpose of a primary education?
- What priorities, structure and components within a redeveloped curriculum can support this?

These questions are at the heart of the proposals presented in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* which is currently being consulted upon. This workshop presents the draft framework and provides information on how to get involved in the consultation in the months ahead.

## **OUR BRAIN, STRESS AND BOUNDARIES: THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP**

### **SEÁNA Ó RODAIGH AND AOIFE HUGHES – BEWELL-DOWELL**

Principals and deputy principals are invited to participate in an interactive workshop on the importance and benefit of understanding neuroscience in sustaining effective school leadership. We will explore how stress literally shapes our brain and in conclusion, highlight the benefit of setting boundaries as a buffer to burnout.

## **PRACTICAL APPROACHES FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF SEN**

### **DEIRDRE BOURKE – NCSE TEAM MANAGER FOR LIMERICK, CLAIRE AND KERRY**

In this workshop, the NCSE will provide practical guidance on approaches to managing special educational needs (SEN) resource allocation and supporting children with SEN. They will also outline the role of NCSE in supporting schools including application processes for SEN resource allocation reviews, teacher professional learning and guidance for school principals and deputy principals on leading inclusive schools. Deirdre leads a team of advisors, SENOs and visiting teachers for deaf/hard of hearing and blind/visually impaired to deliver local services to improve the delivery of education services to persons with SEN.

## **FLIPPING THE CALENDAR ONTO ANOTHER SCHOOL YEAR: HOW TO KEEP EVERYONE GOING**

### **PAUL DICKER – PAUL DICKER CONSULTING**

School leaders have encountered unprecedented challenges in their work over the last 18 months. One of the greatest of these has been the ability to sustain staff motivation levels as difficulties have persisted. This workshop will explore practical strategies for continuing to sustain momentum, enthusiasm and energy within your staff throughout the coming school year.

## **LEADING A SUSTAINABLE APPROACH TO SCHOOL SELF EVALUATION (SSE)**

### **AIDAN O'SHEA, KATE LISTON AND COLM Ó TUATHAIL – PDST LEADERSHIP TEAM**

SSE is about empowering schools to take a look at how they teach and how pupils learn and provides an opportunity to respond flexibly to challenges as they arise - something which is particularly relevant at this time. This workshop will explore how school leaders can engage with the SSE process in a sustainable manner. It will clarify the arrangements for SSE for the 2021/22 school year and outline possible approaches to ensure that SSE goes beyond the remit of senior leadership in the school and is present in every classroom, for every teacher, every day. The links between SSE, DEIS and wellbeing will also be explored and a number of key resources will be presented to help support the successful and sustainable implementation of the SSE process.

## **MIDDLE LEADERSHIP IN OUR SCHOOLS: PRACTICES, POSSIBILITIES AND POTHOLES**

### **FINN Ó MURCHÚ – MIC THURLES HEAD OF SCHOOL**

As we seek to maximise the leadership potential of all in our school, this workshop is based on stories from schools as captured by participants in the MIC Thurles M.Ed in Middle Leadership and Mentoring. Scenarios will blend theory with practice, emotion with ambition with a view to giving participants an opportunity to explore what middle leadership might mean from the perspective of principals and deputy principals across a range of school settings.

## **FOSTERING POSITIVE PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONS AND MAINTAINING POSITIVE STAFF RELATIONS**

### **MARIA MCHENRY, TJ CLARE AND MUIREANN FOYNES – LEGAL, INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND EQUALITY SECTION, INTO**

School leaders play a vital role in maintaining a positive environment for all in the school community. Members of the INTO Legal, Industrial Relations and Equality (LIRE) Team will provide practical advice for principals and deputy principals on engaging proactively with parents and staff in fostering positive parent-staff relations, in addition to promoting and maintaining positive staff relations. From time to time, school leaders may be called upon to engage in the relevant procedures pertaining to staff and parents in order to address issues that arise. Members of the LIRE Team will present and discuss a number of scenarios, generally centred around common queries raised by members in this specific area. It is envisaged that participants would take away some practical information, approaches and strategies for resolving a range of issues, both formal and informal, which may arise amongst staff or between parents and staff.





# Sustaining School Leadership

## Introduction

The statutory provisions pertaining to the functions of the principal as set out in sections 22 and 23 of the *Education Act, 1998*, belie the complexity and day-to-day demands of the role. *Department of Education Circular 0016/1973* sets out the responsibilities and duties of principal teachers. Given the fundamental changes in the education system and society in general, the plethora of legislative requirements, it is somewhat of an enigma that principals are still operating from a circular that is almost 50 years old. Without question the myriad of changes from administrative to increased accountability have had an impact on school leaders.

A study by the INTO (2015) found that principals felt that increased documentation, greater demands from inspectors, curriculum overload and the increased diversity of the pupil population have increased their levels of stress. Additionally, the responsibility to lead teaching and learning in the school, manage staff and the dual roles carried out by teaching principals make the position challenging (Darmody and Smyth, 2016). This is not an issue exclusive to Ireland. Caldwell (2006) noted that “attracting and sustaining appointments to the position of principal is a matter of concern in many countries”. Burnout and stress among school leaders is a very real concern in many countries. The OECD (2014) noted that “in almost every country, the demands and responsibilities of school principals are greater today than at any time in the past.”

## How to sustain school leadership?

So, what can be done to help sustain school leadership? Listening to the voice of the school leaders themselves is an important start (Caldwell, 2006), which is what the INTO has sought to do through its focus groups and interviews with newly appointed, long-serving, retired, aspiring school leaders and leaders who relinquished the role. Distributed leadership, supporting career development, social supports and an education system that supports leaders in their roles are other factors that can help to sustain school leaders and make their work more enjoyable.

*“Sustainable leadership must be a shared responsibility”*

## Distributed leadership

A 2014 OECD report found a positive correlation between high levels of distributed leadership and “a positive school climate characterised by mutual respect, openness and sharing among colleagues”. Additionally, principals who reported higher levels of shared responsibility also tended to report higher levels of job satisfaction.

Sharing the burden of leadership doesn’t only support the well-being and job satisfaction of the principal, it can help to build a lasting legacy. Hargreaves and Fink (2003) highlighted the importance of developing and sharing a vision for the school with others noting that “sustainable leadership must be a shared responsibility”. Sharing the load of leadership throughout the school helps to ensure that the legacy of the principal does not come to an abrupt end if the principal retires or leaves the school, but is carried on through the school community.

Fullan (2004) emphasises that it’s necessary to have a “serious” distribution of leadership. He contends that “it is not simply a matter of having more people with designations of authority and responsibility, although this may help. It is about having a very large number of staff having a leadership role and having all work together in common cause”.

The Department of Education recognised the importance of shared leadership in *Looking at Our Schools* (2016) where one of the standards for school leaders is that they “empower staff to take on and carry out leadership roles.” The partial restoration of middle management posts in recent years was a start in supporting principals to achieve this standard, but the full restoration of posts would further help principals to share the responsibility of leadership and build the leadership capacity of their staff.

## Supporting school leaders’ career development

Parylo et al. (2013) surmise that the literature on principals’ career paths is frequently tied to the impact of job satisfaction. Notwithstanding the high levels of stress and long working hours, Pont et. al (2008) opine that many principals remain on the job because there are no attractive alternatives. Parylo et al. (2013) emphasise that one of the central topics in analysing the longevity of principals’ careers is leader development. Pont et. al (2008) suggest that due to the lifelong tenure of the role and the few opportunities to obtain feedback most countries do not adequately provide for school leaders’ career development. It must be acknowledged that, in recent years, there has been an increased number of professional supports and programmes including coaching, training, professional development opportunities for school leaders’ both prior to entry and during their careers. Notwithstanding these increased supports and programmes, the development of better career prospects for school leaders can make the profession more attractive to future applicants, increase the motivation of serving school leaders on the job and bring benefits to the system by using school leaders’ knowledge and skills in advisory, consultant or coordination activities (Pont et al. (2008)).



*“Positive work relationships improve job satisfaction, cohesion and commitment levels”*

### Social supports

When looking at instances of stress and burnout among school principals in Australia, Beusaert et al. (2016) found that positive relationships and social support from colleagues served as a buffer to burnout. Darmody and Smyth (2016) echoed this, noting that “positive work relationships improve job satisfaction, cohesion and commitment levels”. The INTO’s (2015) study of workload, stress and resilience among teachers and principals in Ireland found that the vast majority of teachers and principals felt that more time for staff collaboration would make their role more satisfying.

Pont et. al (2008) recognise that professional organisations for school leaders provide a forum for dialogue, knowledge sharing and dissemination of best practices among professionals and between professionals and policy makers. The OECD (2019) noted that taking part in professional networks helped lead to innovation and encouraged principals to share ideas. Fullan (2004) also found that the development of lateral support networks with other school leaders was “a powerful strategy for school improvement”. However, sharing with peers, or “fellow travellers who are further down the road”, didn’t just lead to improved outcomes for the school, it also deepened the motivation of those involved in the network, “a key ingredient for sustainability of effort and engagement”. Fullan cautioned, however, against too many networks that may lead to clutter rather than focus.

*“Demands for documentation and insufficient administrative support”*

### A supportive system

There are individual actions that a principal can take to help sustain themselves in their roles. However, there are also institutional factors that influence a principal’s job satisfaction and the broader education system plays an important role in ensuring that principals are supported and nurtured. Darmody and Smyth (2016) note that the challenges are particularly acute for teaching principals and that voluntary boards of management (BOM) often rely heavily on the school principal’s expertise, work and guidance. Hargreaves and Fink (2003) point out that “systems must support sustainable leadership.” By caring for and supporting the well-being of principals, school systems can help ensure that principals can sustain the energy, enthusiasm and motivation that help them to be successful in their role.

The INTO (2015) also highlighted that “demands for documentation and insufficient administrative support” had made the role of the principal more challenging. It recommended a number of supportive initiatives including

at least one release day per week for teaching principals, the restoration of posts of responsibility, the appointment of administrative staff in all schools and the further development of the role of deputy principal.

Darmody and Smyth (2016) suggest the establishment of “an intermediate management tier” between schools and the department that could “help to support school principals by taking responsibility for employment matters, finance and school maintenance and provide a range of support services to all schools.”

### Concluding comment

There are many factors that make the role of a principal challenging and stressful but there are also a number of things that can help to sustain principals in their role as school leaders. Some of these are within the control of the principals themselves, such as building the leadership capacity of colleagues and bolstering themselves with professional support networks.

Other changes require more systemic changes, in the broader education system, to ensure that it supports the well-being and sustainability of school leaders. It is vital too to listen to the voices of our school leaders to determine what they believe are the factors that sustain them in their roles. This is what the INTO has sought to do through the series of focus groups and interviews with current, past and aspiring school leaders, reported on below and in the coming pages.

### What INTO members say about Sustaining School Leadership

To gather the views of teachers on Sustaining School Leadership, the Principals’ and Deputy Principals’ Committee (PDC) set up four focus groups to discuss the issue. Each focus group had between six and 10 participants. The focus groups were comprised as follows:

- Aspiring school leaders
- Newly appointed principals
- Long-serving principals and deputy principals
- Recently retired principals

Due to the restrictions on gatherings because of COVID-19, the focus group discussions were conducted via Microsoft Teams during May 2021. Participants discussed a list of questions, some of which were common to each of the four groups and others which were tailored specifically to the groups. Each focus group was facilitated by Deirdre Kirwan, former principal of a large primary school where 80% of the pupils came from more than 50 culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The PDC wish to express its thanks to all of the participants for their rich feedback, and to Deirdre for skilfully eliciting their views. In addition to the focus groups, one-on-one interviews were conducted with principals who had stepped down from the role. Two interviews were conducted by PDC representative Annraoi Cheevers. The PDC is very grateful to Annraoi and to the two participants who shared their own experiences.



## What has sustained and will sustain school leaders in their roles?

The focus group participants were asked to identify what has sustained them in the role to date or what they feel will sustain them in their roles in the future.

The aspiring school leaders espoused the importance of a work-life balance. They felt that distributive leadership would play an important part in attaining this balance. Self-awareness and the importance of support from the school community was also emphasised. The importance of a collaborative and collegial staff was also identified as a factor for sustaining school leaders. Likewise, the retired school leaders also identified the importance of collegiality, a sense of purpose and having the confidence and belief in colleagues in which to distribute leadership.

One participant remarked that distributing leadership “is not just delegating and walking away but rather keeping an eye on the ball”. Newly appointed school leaders also emphasised the importance of having “an incredible” staff. The importance of building relations with staff was emphasized by many participants across each of the groups as a key factor for sustaining school leaders. While the long serving principals recognised the importance of staff, they placed a greater emphasis on the external supports which are available. They identified the *Misneach* course as an example and strongly emphasised the importance of networking with other principals. This was important as they felt “other principals truly understand other principals”. Through local principal support groups, they highlighted how they can bounce ideas and issues off other principals, particularly when dealing with sensitive matters at local level and to “chat about the same job with the same sort of problems.” The shared interests between and affirmation from other principals was deemed to be invaluable. The newly appointed school leaders felt reassured through being assigned a mentor in the early stages of the role. Conferences, INTO forum meetings, CSL, the PDST leadership team along with other support networks were all noted as being very supportive and for contributing to sustaining school leadership.

Of those who relinquished the role one remarked, that “the job never left my mind, it was non-stop” and “the BOM provided good support but the majority of issues fell on me as principal”. The other principal reported, “my head was full to bursting and I felt like I had gone stale and the school had gone stale, I was burnt out and empty. I simply couldn’t justify the time I was giving to the job; I could not balance the demands of the job with my family life and obligations”. This highlights the importance of time management in the role and achieving a work-life balance. These participants outlined the supports they availed of from management bodies, other principals and professional networks. One participant remarked about not being a “member of any support cluster for principals but would have liked to have been”.

One principal who stepped down mentioned the importance of coaching and in particular availing of it at

an earlier stage. The principal said that they had availed of coaching in the last two years in the role but as a principal they “were done at that stage”. This highlights the importance of availing of necessary supports at an earlier stage before it is too late.

*“Peer support is probably the best thing, fellow principals are the only ones who know what the job is like”*

The importance of peer support emerged from the focus groups with one participant remarking that, “peer support is probably the best thing, fellow principals are the only ones who know what the job is like”. It emerged from the focus groups that both informal and formal supports are of equal importance for sustaining school leadership with the many improvements in supports recognised. These supports can take many guises from a local principal support group to the provision of coaching. The importance of a culture of camaraderie and collegiality amongst staff was also emphasised and highlighted as being important. Similar to the Republic of Ireland, in Northern Ireland, while it is felt that things are becoming more unnecessarily bureaucratic, there is still a strong calibre of individuals coming through and taking on leadership roles. However, one participant felt that there will be a leadership crisis unless strategies and supports are put in place for sustaining school leadership.

## System requirements to sustain school leaders

Participants were asked to consider the system requirements to sustain school leaders. There was a number of views from each of the groups in terms of leadership supports and processes which are required. It was accepted by participants that there is a certain amount of administration which comes with the role. However, one participant surmised that the amount of administration has increased beyond comparison in the past 20 years. There is a wide variety of organisations, statutory bodies and external agencies that school leaders must now interact and engage with which impedes on teaching and learning.

The system requirements which are necessary include:

### a. Administrative supports

The retired school leaders emphasised the importance of secretarial support which they felt assisted them with time management, dates, deadlines and keeping “a step ahead as much as possible”. Likewise, the aspiring school leaders also highlighted the importance of having proper administrative support.

### b. Administrative deputy principals

An administrative deputy principal, particularly in a larger school was highlighted by retired principals as an invaluable support with both working collaboratively together to move the school “in the right direction”.

### c. Release time

Notwithstanding the palpitations reported by some participants with all the work to be completed on





the day, the release time for teaching principals was described by one participant as an “absolute lifesaver”. There was unanimous agreement from all the groups that the one day per week, which all teaching principals now have, must be retained.

**d. Shadowing, mentoring and coaching**

Participants from each of the focus groups felt that these arrangements and supports are of significant benefit. One participant who stepped down cited coaching and regretted not availing of it at an earlier stage. The aspiring school leaders are of the opinion that these programmes are “an essential part of being a school leader”. One long serving principal noted that, such is the complexity of handing over particularly when moving from one school to another, there should be a more structured process put in place during that phase. The retired principals agreed that there should be a formal and proper handover when a principal retires and that newly appointed principals should be able to avail of a shadowing experience for a period of time.

**e. Distributive leadership**

A consistent response from each of the focus groups, both directly and indirectly, was distributive leadership. The importance of empowering others was emphasised. The confidence and belief in colleagues in which to distribute leadership was highlighted by retired school leaders. Creating other leaders through tapping into their talents and distributing tasks amongst the team was recognised as important. The aspiring school leaders also recognised the importance of distributive leadership. One participant remarked how he observed distributive leadership in action in the Middle East. All focus groups emphasised the importance of creating opportunities for distributing leadership and all were in agreement on the need to restore middle management posts for that purpose.

**f. Dignified step down from the role**

There were diverse views as to whether a school leader should remain in a position for a lengthy period of time. Interestingly, it was both the aspiring and newly appointed school leaders who raised this particular issue. There were concerns expressed about the risk of becoming “complacent”, “stagnant” and as one participant put it “outstaying the welcome”. Another participant remarked that, having built up all the experience in the role, “it is very difficult to get out of it”. There was no clear or strong position expressed from any of the focus groups on whether a school leader should step aside after a period of seven years and reinterview thereafter. However, all were in strong agreement and highlighted the need for a dignified step-down facility for principals, with one participant describing the current mechanism as being “harsh”. In recognition of the service and the difficult decision to step down, those who had relinquished the role are of the view that keeping the allowance (or a portion of it) after a certain number of years should be negotiated.

**g. Other issues**

The focus groups highlighted the importance of timely and good communication from the Department of Education. The manner and timing were reported as leaving a lot to be desired. The long serving and retired school leaders emphasized the importance of self-care before it becomes too late. The importance of being able to “switch off” or having an interest outside of school which is non-school related was emphasised. They suggested that further wellbeing and wellness supports be made available.

**Summary**

The relevant research and the focus groups highlighted the importance of the school community and in particular, a collaborative and collegial staff along with the distribution of leadership as some factors for sustaining school leadership. External supports including coaching and engaging with peers through a vast network of supports were also deemed important. Notwithstanding these factors and supports, there are a range of matters which the system itself must address and put in place from administrative support, release time, opportunities to distribute leadership, coaching and mentoring to a dignified step down which would go a long way to Sustaining School Leadership.

**Please note:** References are available on the Principals’ and Deputy Principals’ Conference page of the INTO website.

**Advice you would give**

Peer support is probably the best thing, fellow principals are the only ones who know what the job is like!

Try to turn the negatives in to positives... If you don't do that negativity will just trickle down

Make that space in your life that is not school related

Have a sense of humour and other interests

The best support I got was from colleagues

Have an idea of what kind of leader you want to be in the school. If you don't know what you stand for, you will fall for everything



# Leadership in Northern Ireland

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a sea change in how teachers across the island of Ireland have delivered the curriculum to the children and young people in their care. This has led to teachers having to come to grips with new forms of learning delivery and, the use of technologies in ways that they were neither trained in, nor often comfortable with, using.

No one could possibly have envisaged, other than in the most exceptional of circumstances, that pupils would be taught remotely in their own homes. Teachers were expected to upskill with little support from the employing authorities, and who would have believed that the most used phrase in a teacher's vocabulary would become: "You're on mute!"

Schools in Northern Ireland went into lockdown on 23 March 2020, with very little advice or notice given to school leaders. These same school leaders, both in primary and post primary, already carried an ever-increasing workload, due to the demands being placed upon them in the face of ever reducing financial viability of the education system.

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In simple terms, the cuts to education budgets had already seen a proportionate increase in principal workloads as schools have been forced to pick up the service shortfalls arising from these cuts. The deficits identified across the system have manifested themselves in other ways. Increasingly the education bureaucracy has sought to divest itself of responsibilities along with the legal liabilities that accompany them. These burdens have been passed on to principals, leadership teams, boards of governors and individual teachers. Some of the more obvious examples of this policy development are:

- re-directing the deployment of special needs resources onto school budget holders and individual teachers;
- professional development and school improvement training requirements are now funded directly from individual school budgets due to the decimation of Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) little or no maintenance work being paid for by the Education Authority (EA);
- principals, vice principals and teachers forced to use their own time to support each other professionally and pastorally;
- an increasing proliferation of independent educational consultants profiting from school budgets to advise

schools and assist schools in tasks previously carried out by the EA.

The response to the COVID-19 situation across the education system was seen by many as knee-jerk. Though it had been evident for a number of weeks that schools would have to close in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus, there was no co-ordinated plan put in place to meet the needs of the system. Initially, schools were closed, and the direction from government was that everyone should work from home.

It then became apparent that, to accommodate children of essential workers, some pupils would have to return to school. The new concern became how to identify key workers. While those in the health service could be easily identified and plans put in place to support them, the definition of a key worker was quickly expanded. School leaders had to plan so that their schools could meet these needs. Teachers, on a voluntary basis, went on to rotas, to be available to come into schools to help supervise these pupils. This was on top of providing a range of distance learning for their other pupils.

With each communication from the Department of Education changes to the arrangements for providing for the education of children and young people were adjusted, with very limited time scales to introduce such mitigations. While it appeared that schools were closed, the number of pupils attending rose each time a new category of worker was added to the key worker list. Rotas had to be constantly adjusted, where teachers and classroom assistants were forced to self-isolate if they became exposed to the virus.

Given that there was no uniform availability of technology across the system, and the diversity of access to broadband across rural and urban districts, each school leader had to plan in isolation for how best to provide for the educational needs of the children and young people in their care. This often led to comparisons of the available provision across schools by parents, many of whom appeared unaware of the issues that school leaders faced. In many cases this led to criticism of individual school leaders across social media platforms by parents.

At the end of the 2020 summer term, the Department of Education produced the first of their *Education Restart* documents. This was a 70-page document, outlining how schools would need to be organised to allow all pupils to return in September 2020. This led to principals spending the summer break in school, measuring rooms, relocating staff rooms, creating and erecting signage for one-way systems, re-organising systems for pupil drop-off and collection and informing parents of the raft of mitigations that had to be put in place to ensure that all pupils and staff were kept safe.



As the school year progressed, principals became responsible for the track and trace of pupils and staff in school. This led, where an outbreak was identified, to them contacting Public Health Agency (PHA), often at weekends, for the most up-to-date advice, and then having to contact parents and staff to inform that whole class groups that they would have to isolate.

Further guidance was released, normally at 6 pm on a Friday, always adding to the workload of school leaders as new mitigations had to be in place at very short notice.

As the year progressed, much has been made of the effect of the lockdown on the mental health of the children and young people in schools, and the duty of care owed to them by school leaders, teachers and school staff. Much has been put in place by schools to attempt to combat difficulties that pupils have faced. School leaders have put in place many mitigations to help with combating issues around these issues for their staff.

Unfortunately, as so often happens, school leaders have not asked for, or in many cases been offered, the same level of support for themselves.

## Keynote speaker - Declan Coyle



Declan is a director of Andec Communications and one of Ireland's most internationally experienced leadership training and development consultants. He is also much sought after as a conference keynote speaker. He has delivered specialist programmes on leadership, culture change, management, sales and

organisational development to clients in Ireland, the UK, Holland, Germany, France, Denmark, Russia, Hungary, Ukraine, USA, Hong Kong, Thailand, The Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, China, India and Australia. Married to Annette Kinne from Australia, he has three children, Genevieve, Fionn and Alexander.

His unique Green Platform Life Changing inner software management system has revolutionised leadership and team-building thinking, performance and culture in companies and organisations.

Declan has worked with government ministers, government departments, semi-state bodies, multi-

national companies, SMEs and charities. His success as a key motivator for business leaders has been harnessed in the sports arena where he has given regular Green Platform mental strength motivational sessions to a number of All-Ireland winning GAA teams. He is a former Ulster Championship medal winner who played senior football with Cavan. He also worked with the Kentucky Wildcats when they won the National Basketball Title in the US.

He is fluent in a number of languages, including Mandarin, and has a master's degree in theology and an STL and from his post-graduate work at Ottawa University and St Paul University in Canada.

He is the author of the number one best selling book, *The Green Platform*, an innovative "inner software" methodology that has transformed the morale, productivity and profitability of companies across the globe.

His second book, *Living The Green Platform - Life Changing Stories* has 90 inspirational stories about how people transformed their lives with Green Platform conscious choice making.

He has been a guest on many television shows and radio programmes, including *The Late Late Show*, *The Saturday Night Show*, *Ireland AM*, *The Joe B. and Denny Show* (Kentucky), *The Ray D'Arcy Show*, Radio Vermont and *One to One* with Bill Goodman in the US.

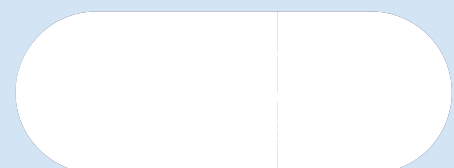
## Budget 2022 – Support School Leaders

At the heart of a strong school community is a well-supported school leader. During the pandemic, our school principals rose to the challenge time and time again. It's critical that teaching principals have time to carry out administrative duties and all schools should have a full restoration of middle management posts. In addition, access to a supply panel of substitute teachers reduces workload for principals and ensures that every child can be taught by a qualified teacher, every day.

The INTO is campaigning for critical investment in our primary and special schools in the forthcoming Budget 2022, including a call for government to:

- ✧ Restore middle management posts.
- ✧ Provide for the continuation of a minimum of one leadership and management day (release day) per week.
- ✧ Establish supply panels on a nationwide basis.

We need your help: visit <https://bit.ly/INTOBudget22> to send an email to your local TDs. Raise your voice and demand we support school leaders and prioritise our primary and special schools in Budget 2022.







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