

# Principals' and Deputy Principals' Conference 2023

## Distributed Leadership: A Northern Ireland Perspective



Irish National Teachers' Organisation  
*Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann*

Vere Foster House  
35 Parnell Square  
Dublin 1  
D01 ET35

Tel: 01 804 7700  
Fax: 01 8722462  
Email: [info@into.ie](mailto:info@into.ie)  
Web: [www.into.ie](http://www.into.ie)  
General Secretary: John Boyle



Over the past couple of decades, schools have courageously struggled with the concept of shared or distributed leadership amidst a basic landscape of school leadership which remains heavily hierarchical.

Challenges and opportunities facing schools and their leaders have never been greater. Many Northern Ireland schools are facing the restructuring of leadership roles as some current Vice Principals retire from the system and are not replaced. This coupled with the reluctance for teachers to take on additional leadership responsibilities due to additional workload and/or the lack of funding for the roles within smaller school budgets are having a significant impact on the recruitment of these roles. The appetite for change is evident within a wide circle of educational stakeholders, seen in the policy change which has been introduced within the last seven years and particularly in response to the post pandemic years.

The ability to improve schools and secure the highest possible standards of achievement for every pupil is both the function and responsibility of school leaders, however the notion that a single heroic and omniscient figure can direct and implement the complex changes necessary for success is no longer sustainable.

Principals increasingly involve others at all levels in the leadership in their schools, building leadership capacity in individuals and of the school. Consistently high performing schools are characterised by shared approaches to leadership, although there is no single model that will fit all schools. There is a general acceptance that distributed leadership assists school improvement.

For 'good' schools to become 'great' schools they need to extend their experience of effective leadership to others in building the capacity of the whole of the Northern Ireland education system.

### **What is in place to support distributed leadership?**

The Department of Education Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning – **“Learning Leaders”** – launched in 2016. The Strategy was built on the Department’s 2009 school improvement policy – Every School a Good School – which recognised that teachers need high quality professional learning opportunities to meet pupils’ developing needs in a rapidly changing world. The Strategy’s vision was:

**Every teacher is a learning leader, accomplished in working collaboratively with all partners in the interests of children and young people.**

The overall aim of the Strategy is to empower the teaching profession to strengthen its professionalism and expertise to meet the challenging and diverse educational needs of all our children and young people. Enhancing the knowledge and skills of the teaching workforce enables our teachers to provide effective instruction that supports the development of the critical skills necessary for the various stages of our children’s education.

Continued implementation of the Learning Leaders Strategy has been significantly impacted due to the pandemic and school closures and restrictions over that time. Inroads which had been made in establishing learning communities and collaborative working between schools are significantly reduced. Schools are currently rebuilding these links and reestablishing strategic plans for future work; however, this is all set within a context of ongoing industrial action because of the lack of any pay award to teachers in Northern Ireland for the last three years.

Investment in education is key at all levels of the system, including the pay for all education workers, to ensure our children and young people have the education system they deserve.



## **Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) – ‘Empowering Improvement’**

In the months that followed the pandemic ETI, like all other education and training organisations, were working hard to understand the legacy of the pandemic and discern the best way forward. Many of the Inspectorate team had been part of the support network for schools during this time and had a lot of anecdotal feedback from schools.

They committed to wide-scale, consultation and engagement with schools, organisations and other stakeholders around sustainable capacity-building of key staff in the important area of self-evaluation leading to improvement.

Funding was secured to deliver a programme of professional learning/capacity building. The self-evaluation work was targeted at the middle leadership level across primary, post-primary and special schools. This work was delivered through the 2021-22 academic year.

It focused on self-evaluation: leading to whole-organisation improvement (from the perspective of middle leadership); and of learning and teaching, encompassing digital learning.

The high-level aims of the project were anchored around promoting organisational improvement to enhance learners’ learning experiences and improve outcomes.

This showed an understanding from the engagement with school leaders that without system wide supports in place then school leaders could not carry the improvement plans forward themselves. A need for distributed leadership in all aspects of school improvement was required. The high level of involvement from schools which followed demonstrated the appetite was there amongst the teachers for engagement in this work.

### **Programmes of training**

The Education Authority in Northern Ireland provide a range of training programmes with professional learning and development opportunities for middle, senior and school leaders. They include STEPS into Leadership, Senior Leadership Pathways, First-Time Vice-Principals, First-Time Principals, Coaching Service for School Principals and the School Leader as Coach programme.

These courses are part of the leadership continuum of professional learning and provide teachers with a pathway to leadership. The programmes are designed to build the capacity of new or aspiring middle and senior leaders to lead impactful and positive change in their school setting. The professional learning opportunity includes a school-based improvement project (SIP) providing the opportunity to put professional learning into practice.

### **How then would distributed leadership occur?**

When a school community—or a particular group within the school—joins together for a common goal and charts a course together, it shows a collaborative investment in the school’s present and future. And, when people are engaged and being trusted to make decisions that can create impactful changes for a school and its students, the work they do takes on a deeper, more joyful meaning.

Having a support system in which to accomplish the work—and knowing those supports are there to reduce those feelings of isolation and overwhelm that will inevitably pop up is incredibly important. These benefits can’t be underestimated, especially in our current climate. As the funding crisis continues, and teachers and leaders alike are reporting record-high levels of burnout, distributed leadership might hold the key to feeling seen, appreciated, and valued. After all, it’s much easier to weather challenges and feel hopeful about the outcomes when you have a group of people to lean on and learn from.

Distributed leadership really just means encouraging teachers to do what they do best—and empowering them to challenge themselves to do it bigger and better. Every teacher brings leadership qualities to your table...all those qualities can be leveraged and encouraged for your students’ benefit.