PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

55th Annual Conference

Principals and Deputy Principals Association

Michael Murphy

PDA President

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Delegates, colleagues and friends,

It is a great honour, as President of the PDA, to welcome you to our 55th Annual Conference here in Trim.

Last year, as we concluded our conference in Cavan, I said that I looked forward to meeting you here in Trim on the 18th, 19th and 20th of November. Twelve months later, it is wonderful to see that gathering become a reality.

And perhaps more importantly, it is good to have the opportunity to stop.

Because leadership rarely gives us permission to stop.

Our phones do not stop. Our inboxes certainly do not stop. (Unless there is an AI hack) The circulars do not stop. The deadlines do not stop. And sometimes it can feel as if the expectations placed on Principals and Deputy Principals grow faster than the resources available to meet them.

So, for these few days, I hope we can step back from the immediate demands of our schools and colleges.

I hope we can talk honestly. I hope we can listen to one another. And I hope we can remind ourselves that, while leadership can sometimes feel like a very solitary responsibility, none of us is doing this alone.

That, fundamentally, is what the PDA is about.

Leadership in 2026

When I addressed you last year, I spoke about leadership in a time of complexity. I am not sure it has become any less complex.

Throughout this year, our Executive has heard the concerns of Principals and Deputy Principals from across the country.

Again and again, the same themes have emerged: workload and administrative pressure, recruitment and retention, substitution, SEN and ASD provision and now needs assessment, allowances and leadership allocations, examinations administration, Senior Cycle reform, ICT investment, staff leave and cover, funding pressures and the increasing number of responsibilities being placed at school level.

These are not abstract policy questions. They arrive in the Principal's and Deputy Principal's office every morning.

They arrive as a staffing problem that has to be solved before nine o'clock. They arrive as a student who needs additional support. They arrive as a parent looking for an answer. They arrive as a new initiative, a new reporting requirement, a new circular or another deadline.

And ultimately, whatever the issue, there is an expectation that the school leadership team will find a way through it.

We usually do.

But there is an important distinction between a system that works because it is properly designed and resourced, and a system that works because committed people continually compensate for its weaknesses.

Our education system cannot depend indefinitely on the goodwill and resilience of its leaders.

The Workload Question

If there is one issue that has run through our discussions this year, it is workload.

The Executive has repeatedly heard concerns about increasing administrative responsibilities and the pressures being carried by Principals and Deputy Principals.

In May, those concerns included the additional workload created by partial absences and substitution arrangements, SEC administration, Schools Dinners, School Books, Senior Cycle implementation, child protection and the range of SEN-related responsibilities now being managed within schools.

This is not an argument against accountability. Nor is it an argument against reform. As educational leaders, we understand both.,

But every new responsibility placed on a school must bring with it a very straightforward question:

Who is going to do this work, when are they going to do it, and what resource has been provided to make it possible?

If those questions cannot be answered, then what appears to be a small policy change at national level can become yet another substantial responsibility at school level.

Consultation matters. Planning matters. Resources matter. And timing matters.

Reform Must Be Deliverable

Last year I said that reform without resourcing is not progress, it is pressure. That remains true.

We should welcome educational reform where it improves outcomes for students. We should embrace innovation. We should never become an organisation that simply argues for things to remain as they were.

But good reform must be implementable.

Senior Cycle developments, Additional Assessment Components, additional-needs provision and evolving curriculum requirements all have consequences for staffing, timetabling, facilities and school leadership.

Our Executive discussions this year have specifically highlighted the challenges smaller schools face in delivering Senior Cycle, along with shortages in areas including Physics and Maths and a wide range of subjects according to our annual survey.

A policy can look perfectly manageable on paper. It is when the timetable has to be devised, the teacher has to be found, the room has to be provided and the student has to be supported that policy meets reality.

We listened to Brendan Doody this morning as he discussed Leadership for Inclusion Building Equitable, inclusive Learning and working environments. Brendan spoke about the challenges and controversies involved in special education, our differing perspectives and lack of a shared understanding. He acknowledged the debate that surrounds Special Classes we hope his attendance here is an acknowledgement that the PDA is an integral voice in the school system.

I want to say we appreciate the work that has been done on inclusion He referenced the Minister for Children and the timeline conundrum but as we have said,

Principals and Deputy Principals are not qualified to conduct AEN assessments, nor can we be the arbiter of decisions to award places in schools when the requirement for assessment has been removed. To ask us to complete this task will put Principals and Deputy Principals under insurmountable pressure. We do acknowledge that this is a needs-based system but principals and deputy principals and the system itself have needs too. We fundamentally agree with the Vision presented by the Department but until the wrap around services, training, buildings, staffing and resources are given the vision cannot be a reality, regardless of high-quality leadership. We need more supports; we need to get this right too.

The voice of the Principal and Deputy Principal therefore needs to be present before implementation begins, not after problems appear.

PDA plays an important role in bringing that operational reality into national discussions via the TUI.

Supporting Every Learner

The provision of appropriate support for learners with additional educational needs has remained a significant issue throughout the year.

Our Executive has discussed SEN and ASD coordinator allocations, Behaviour for Learning supports, special-class provision and admissions, and the increasing responsibilities falling to school leadership teams.

Earlier in the year, area reports also raised concerns about coordinator allocations and the pressure associated with expanding ASD provision.

We all want an inclusive education system. But inclusion has to mean more than creating a programme or establishing a class.

True inclusion requires appropriate staffing, facilities, professional development, coordination time and sustained support.

Because behind every allocation and every policy is a young person and a family depending upon us to get this right.

Principals and Deputy Principals as Educational Leaders

There is another point I believe we need to keep making.

We did not become Principals and Deputy Principals simply to administer organisations. We became educational leaders.

Yet the danger is that increasing administration gradually pulls us away from the work that matters most: teaching and learning, supporting staff, developing our schools and colleges, and creating opportunities for young people.

Leadership structures must recognise the reality of the modern role.

That means looking seriously at leadership allocations, at the position of smaller schools, at Deputy Principal provision and at the increasing complexity of managing modern educational organisations.

Last year I argued that every school, irrespective of size or designation, deserves appropriate leadership support. I remain convinced of that. Leadership capacity is not an administrative luxury. It directly affects the quality and sustainability of our education system.

Further Education and Training

As many of you know, Further Education and Training is particularly close to my own heart.

The PDA will continue to represent Principals and Deputy Principals working across the full breadth of our sector. During the year, the Executive received updates on the FET Expert Review Panel. FET is evolving quickly. Our governance and leadership structures must evolve with it.

I made the point last year that FET should have arrangements reflecting its distinctive mission, diverse learner population and evolving place within Irish education. That case remains important.

The future education system will not be defined by rigid divisions between different parts of education. It will be defined by pathways, progression and opportunity.

We need an education system where a young person or an adult learner can move through different routes without one being considered inherently superior to another.

FET has a central role in making that possible.

Technology and Artificial Intelligence

We also cannot discuss the future of educational leadership without discussing technology and Artificial Intelligence.

Last year, I spoke about the opportunities AI creates, but also the questions it raises around ethics, equity and implementation.

Twelve months later, that conversation has moved even faster.

Our responsibility now is not simply to ask whether AI will affect education. It already has. The real question is how we use it responsibly.

If technology can reduce repetitive administration, support better planning or give teachers and school leaders more time for meaningful work with students and staff, then we should examine those opportunities seriously.

But technology must serve education. Education should not find itself reorganised simply to serve technology.

And investment matters. Our September Executive discussions again identified ICT funding and digital support among the concerns being raised nationally.

We need sustainable investment that is allows schools to develop a sustainable ICT strategy rather than short-term year to year solutions.

The Strength of the PDA

Throughout my term as President, one thing has become clearer to me.

The real strength of the PDA is not the President, the officers or the Executive. It is the network.

It is a Principal in Mayo being able to hear that a colleague in Cork, Dublin, Kerry, Meath, Tipperary or Cavan is facing the same challenge.

It is the ability to take an issue that appears local and discover that it is national. It is the ability to share practical experience. And sometimes it is simply knowing that somebody else understands.

Our Executive brings together representatives from ETB regions across the country, and those regional voices have informed our discussions throughout the year.

That network matters. We should continue to strengthen it.

Partnership

The PDA also cannot work effectively in isolation.

Our relationship with the TUI as an subcommittee remains enormously important.

During the year the Executive explicitly acknowledged the TUI's lobbying in relation to the timely communication of Department information.

There will always be issues on which robust discussion is needed. That is healthy.

But partnership, when grounded in honesty and mutual respect, gives us a much stronger voice.

Because ultimately, we share an objective: schools and colleges that work for students, for staff and for the communities we serve.

A Word About Resilience

We use the word resilience quite a lot in education. Sometimes, perhaps, too much.

We tell leaders to be resilient. We tell teachers to be resilient. We tell students to be resilient.

But resilience should never become an excuse for an inadequately supported system.

Last year I spoke about the importance of Principals and Deputy Principals taking their contractual holidays and having an opportunity to properly switch off. I make no apology for repeating that message and we appreciate the TUI's support in notifying all stakeholders of the need for us to take our holidays and allow us to return fully recharged to run our colleges.

Look after yourselves. Look after your Deputy Principal. Look after your Principal. Look after the colleague who appears to have everything under control.

Leadership is demanding. None of us becomes better at it through exhaustion.

Thanks

Before concluding, I want to acknowledge the considerable amount of work that has gone into bringing this 55th Annual Conference together.

Conference planning has been underway throughout the year, by September, all speaker slots had been filled and thirty-five exhibitor places had been booked, reflecting the significant organisational effort behind this week's event.

To the organising committee, thank you.

To our speakers and contributors, thank you for giving your time and expertise.

To our exhibitors and sponsors, thank you for supporting the Association and this conference.

And I encourage delegates to make time to visit the exhibition area during the conference. One of the lessons from our review of last year's conference was that delegates needed more opportunities to engage with our exhibitors.

I also want to thank the members of our PDA Executive for the work they do throughout the year. Some of that work is visible. A great deal of it is not. But the contribution is significant. I would like to pay special thanks to Tom Huges, Mattie Kilroy, Mick Daly and Brian Ó Maoilchiaráin for all their help and assistance. I would like to thank Matt Power for organising the stands.

I particularly want to acknowledge colleagues who have completed roles during this year.

Mary Cullen stepped down as the Kildare Wicklow Area Representative, and Sandra O'Toole, who served as an officer of the Association, retired from her school. Their contribution was formally acknowledged by the Executive in September.

On behalf of the Association, I again thank them sincerely.

Finally

Last year in Cavan, I finished my address with a simple challenge: Choose to make a difference.

This year, I want to leave you with something even simpler.

Make leadership matter.

Make it matter when a young teacher needs encouragement.

Make it matter when a student needs somebody to believe in them.

Make it matter when a colleague needs support.

Make it matter when a policy does not work and somebody needs to say so.

Make it matter when those making decisions need to understand what is actually happening in our schools and colleges.

And make it matter by remembering that leadership is not measured by how many emails we answer, meetings we attend or forms we complete.

It is measured in people. In opportunities created. In confidence restored. In teachers supported. And ultimately, in the lives of the learners who walk through our doors every morning.

We will not solve every challenge facing education during these three days in Trim.

But we can listen. We can challenge. We can learn. We can reconnect. And we can leave here stronger than when we arrived.

That is the value of this Association. That is the value of this conference. And that is the value of standing together as Principals and Deputy Principals.

Thank you for what you do.

Thank you for your support of the PDA.

And, most importantly, thank you for your leadership.

On a personal note, as my three years as President come to an end, I want to say how much I have enjoyed the role. It has been a genuine privilege to represent you and to get to know so many colleagues across the country. I have learned a great deal, made many friendships and enjoyed every step of the journey. I would like to pay a special mention to my wife Carol and my 4 daughters Ava, Leah, Zoe and Ruby for their support. **I now hand over to Denis Quinn, and I wish Denis every success and, most importantly, every enjoyment in his new role.** I know he will have the full support of the Association behind him.

I hope you have a productive, enjoyable and memorable conference here in Trim.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.