

## Country Background Report Ireland

### 1. Background to the Report



The Education Environment in Ireland – the reality in 2009

The education environment within which school leaders and teachers work in Ireland is changing rapidly. Much change can be attributed to systemic factors in the field of education relating to legislation, school patronage, policies and curricula ([www.education.gov.ie](http://www.education.gov.ie)).

However, the recent economic downturn has had a critical impact on schools. At the time of writing, the number of teaching posts in schools is to be reduced, bringing the pupil-teacher ratio back to that of 2006-2007. This is just one of the many significant areas of education to be targeted for cuts by the government. Most teachers, members of the public service, have permanent employment and are seen by their private sector colleagues as being well placed to ride out the recession. Therefore when the government announced a levy on public service pensions – up to 9% increase in real terms – there was very little sympathy expressed in the media. The social unrest generated by the recession will have repercussions on the work of all school leaders.

The proposed cut of 20% in capitation grant to primary schools means that Boards of Management (the management body of each school) will not have sufficient funds to discharge day to day costs and will seriously affect the ability of Boards of Management to run primary schools. The report, by Dr. Colm McCarthy, on the financial situation in the country and the cuts in spending needed in every department of State, does not seem to have taken into account the contribution of the 20,000 volunteers (*i.e. members of Board of Management*) who have managed and run the primary system over several decades up to the present at no cost to the state. Primary education

has always been underfunded even during recent times of plenty. Boards have the statutory responsibility for managing schools but they cannot continue do so without adequate funding from the state.

The proposed increase in class size means that the individual child's education will be seriously affected and also targets those most in need. The proposal to close small schools will have a negative impact on the social fabric of local communities and will mean that small children will have to travel longer distances with resultant lengthening of their school day. Increased transport costs and additional costs to parents will also result. Many of the proposed cuts target the most vulnerable i.e. the ban on recruitment to National Educational Psychological Service, reduction in the number of Special Needs Assistants, reduction of numbers of teachers of English as an Additional Language etc. See [www.cpsma.ie](http://www.cpsma.ie) for further background to the present situation.

The Irish National Teacher's Union (INTO) said the report from the Central Statistics Office shows that Ireland's primary classrooms are among the most crowded in Europe. The union said the CSO publication made a mockery of the McCarthy report which last month proposed further increasing class sizes in primary schools. The general secretary of the INTO, John Carr said the report provided clear evidence that Irish classes are overcrowded. It reported that the average class size in Ireland for primary education was 24.5 which was the joint highest along with Britain among reporting EU 27 countries.

The President of the Principals and Deputy Principal's Association (PDA) Kevin Whyte said: "Using any objective criteria there will be very considerably less teachers in schools in at the start of the school year. Principals are now trying to finalise timetables for the academic year 2009/2010 which is proving very difficult if not impossible within the guidelines and recommendations set down by the Department of Education and Science."

"The net result will be less subject choice for students and the possible removal of programmes such as the Leaving Certificate

Applied that help greatly with student retention beyond the junior cycle.

“The Department has claimed that current teacher numbers will not be finalised until later in the year, but all students must be catered for in every school from the first day of term, not in November or December.

“We urge that the worst of the cutbacks – including cuts to the book grant - be reversed and that education be insulated from further attacks going forward.”

## 2. Context – School Governance

Ireland has a long and prestigious tradition in education, dating back to the middle ages when it held the position of one of the principal education providers to the western world.

Overall responsibility for education in Ireland lies with the Minister for Education who is a member of the Irish Government and responsible to the National Parliament.

### National and local context – Overview of the Governance of Irish Schools

The Minister for Education and Science  
The principal functions of the Department are outlined in its Mission Statement.

“The mission of the Department of Education and Science is to provide high-quality education, which will:

- Enable individuals to achieve their full potential and to participate fully as members of society, and
- Contribute to Ireland’s social, cultural and economic development.”

### Inspectorate

Some of the key tasks of the Inspectorate set out in the *Education Act* include:

- To support and advise recognised schools, teachers and boards of management on matters relating to the provision of education, through evaluation of the organisation and

operation of schools and the quality of education provided therein

- To evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the provision of education
- To conduct research into education and to support policy formulation
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching, development, promotion and use of Irish in schools, and
- To advise on any matter relating to education policy and provision, including curriculum, assessment and teaching methods

The system is at once highly centralised and decentralised with no intermediate structures between individual schools, each with its own Board of Management (BoM) and the national Ministry of Education and Science (DES). Very recent legislation has created a Teaching Council, and this resonates with similar structures in Scotland, Australia and Canada. However, despite these structural advances in recent years, the legacy of the evolution of the Irish education with its origins firmly rooted in nineteenth century politics continues to cast long shadows in the present.

There are 3200 primary schools in the system, the vast majority of which are owned by the dominant Catholic Church, a small number of Church of Ireland Schools, a small, but expanding multi-denominational sector of 19 schools with plans to double this number within 5 years, and a larger Irish language medium sector with more than 135 schools; both of these sectors having their respective umbrella organisations – Educate Together and Gaelscoileanna. As indicated, each school has its own BoM, with parent, community and teacher representation, with the principal as a member, typically a secretary, but without voting rights. While it is no longer axiomatic that the chairperson of the board be the local clergyman, this continues to be the case in the majority of schools. Teachers’ salaries are paid by the state, but all teachers, including principals, are employed by the boards of individual schools and this has significant consequences for teacher mobility, particularly in a system that is small to begin with and in a career with little opportunity for advancement. More recently, in 1998, as part of a national wage agreement, a new system of middle-management for schools was created.

There has been considerable success in the appointment of skilled and experienced teachers to these positions. They are responsible for leading learning and teaching initiatives in the school, making the term 'distributed leadership' a reality.

### **Second Level Education in Ireland**

The second-level education sector comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Secondary schools are privately owned and managed. The trustees of the majority of these schools are religious communities or Boards of Governors. Vocational schools are administered by Vocational Education Committees while community and comprehensive schools are managed by Boards of Management of differing compositions.

Building on the foundation of primary education, second-level education aims to provide a comprehensive, high-quality learning environment which enables all students to live full lives, appropriate to their stage of development, and to realise their potential as individuals and as citizens. It aims to prepare students for adult life and to help them proceed to further education or directly to employment. Second-level education consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two or three-year senior cycle. The Junior Certificate examination is taken on completion of a Junior Certificate course of three years duration. The Junior Cycle covers a vital period in young people's lives when they encounter significant changes in their educational experience. The principal objective of the Junior Cycle is for students to complete broad, balanced and coherent courses of study in a variety of curricular areas relevant to their own personal development and to allow them to achieve a level of competence in these courses which will enable them to proceed to senior cycle education.

A three-year Senior Cycle has been introduced as an option for second-level schools. The programmes now available at Senior Cycle include:

- Transition Year
- Established Leaving Certificat
- Leaving Certificate Applied
- Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

One of the aims of the restructured Senior Cycle is to encourage students to continue in full-time education after the compulsory school leaving age by providing a range of programmes suited to their abilities, aptitudes and interests.

An important overall objective of the restructuring of the Senior Cycle is to provide for the holistic development of all students and to foster a sense of self-esteem, self-reliance and innovation to help them to be involved actively in the social and economic future of society

## **3. School leadership concepts and practices**

### **Conceptual framework**

The work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment ([www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie))

The NCCA was established in November 1987 as a successor to the Curriculum and Examinations Board and was reconstituted as a statutory body in July 2001.

The brief of the statutory Council as outlined in the Education Act, 1998 is to advise the Minister for Education and Science on matters relating to "... the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools and the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum." (41.1 a, b)

The NCCA is committed to improving the quality of education through continuous review of curriculum and assessment provision.

The work involves five types of activity:

- *planning* curriculum and assessment initiatives
- *consulting* with all key partner organisations
- *supporting* the change process in schools
- *reviewing the* experiences of the implementation of curriculum and assessment change
- *informing* about developments in curriculum and assessment.

Funding for the NCCA is by way of a grant from the Department of Education and Science. Additional project specific funding is sourced from a range of organisations and agencies.

The work of the NCCA is carried out by a small executive staff. To progress and support its work, Council has a range of sub-committees. These committees are made up of representatives of the Department of Education and Science and State Examinations Commission, teacher unions and school managerial bodies, parent organisations, subject associations and higher education interests including universities and other colleges.

### Curriculum

The curriculum for Ireland's primary and post-primary schools is determined by the Minister for Education and Science who is advised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The curriculum sets out not only what is to be taught, but how, and how learning in the particular subject area is to be assessed.

While Ireland has a centrally devised curriculum, there is a strong emphasis on school and classroom planning. At school level, the particular character of the school makes a vital contribution to shaping the curriculum in classrooms. Adaptation of the curriculum to suit the individual school is achieved through the preparation and continuous updating of a school plan. The selection of text books and classroom resources to support the implementation of the curriculum is made by schools, rather than by the Department of Education and Science or the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

### Assessment

Assessment is that part of the learning process where the learner and the teacher can evaluate

progress or achievement in the development of a particular skill, or in the understanding of a particular area of knowledge. In the early years, such assessment is generally informal based on observation by a parent/guardian or early learning practitioner.

In primary school, this informal observation is supplemented by a range of assessment tools including teacher-designed tests and tasks, project work and portfolios across the curriculum. Standardised tests in reading and mathematics are also widely used in primary schools. In post-primary schools the state examinations - the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations - are also used to evaluate achievement across the curriculum.

Assessment generates important information about how a learner is progressing. This information can be shared with the learner in the form of feedback which should help the learner to become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and identify next steps and strategies for improvement. The information is also important for teacher planning. Assessment information can help a teacher to choose the right resource materials for a learner or for a class, and to plan and structure the learning to meet the different needs of different learners. Assessment information is also important for parents, and is reported to them as part of all schools' reporting process.

Another type of assessment - screening or diagnostic assessment - is also useful, especially in the early years of primary school. If a parent or teacher suspects that a child may have a specific difficulty, or if the child is not progressing as well as their peers, the learning support or class teacher may use a special test or series of tests that provided more detailed.

There are three teachers' unions in the setting, one that includes the vast majority of primary teachers, including principals, while the other two have membership in the post-primary sector. In recent years, all have become committed and active in the provision of learning opportunities for membership, with the primary teachers' union (INTO) particularly active in this regard (see Sugrue & Uí Thuama, 1997). Consequently, an increasing amount of provision consists of

teachers (often seconded from classrooms) working with teachers, sharing 'craft knowledge'. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13674580200200185>

### Focus on Teaching and Learning

"School leadership is a key factor in raising educational achievement and is second only to teacher quality in terms of its impact on pupil attainment" (Leithwood et al., 2006). There's a growing awareness in Ireland that school leaders must focus their attention on how best to support and put in place procedures and practices that help teachers effect improvement in teaching and learning. Key support agencies for this focus include:

Leadership Development for School (LDS)

[www.lds21.ie](http://www.lds21.ie)

Second Level Support Service (SLSS)

[www.slss.ie](http://www.slss.ie)

School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI)

[www.sdpi.ie](http://www.sdpi.ie)

Curriculum Development Unit

[www.curriculum.ie](http://www.curriculum.ie)

Transition Year Support Service

[www.ty.slss.ie](http://www.ty.slss.ie)

School Development Planning Support (SDPS)

[www.sdps.ie](http://www.sdps.ie)

Primary curriculum Support Programme

[www.pcsp.ie](http://www.pcsp.ie)

Special Education Support Service

[www.sess.ie](http://www.sess.ie)

Behaviour Support Service

[www.bss.ie](http://www.bss.ie)

The above support services form part of the process of implementation of policy development and change within the education system. For example, "curriculum change developed by the NCCA is implemented in schools with the support at primary level from the primary Curriculum Support Programme and at post-primary level from the Second Level Support Service. School Development Planning Support Service works with all schools to review, design, implement and evaluate their planning process" to fulfil the requirements of the Education Act (1998). Department of Education and Science (DES) organizes professional development in schools and facilitators from the above support services work with staffs both in and outside school time. In addition, accredited programmes are offered to teachers during non-school contact time.

Increasingly, personnel from the support services are available to work with teachers and teaching teams in school to facilitate school planning and curriculum review. Facilitators may be invited in consultation with the staff.

## Restructuring and Re-culturing School Organisations

### School Leadership

Three phases in the evolution of school leadership can be categorized as follows:

- Prior to 1971, predominately administrative
- 1971-1989, predominately managerial
- 1990 to date a growing emphasis on leadership in addition to the tasks of administration and management (Sugrue, 2003).

### Quality Assurance – Whole School Evaluation

In Ireland there is a growing recognition that the quality in schools is best achieved when a range of measures work together to improve teaching and learning and where everyone involved in the system is focused on improvement? Schools themselves are responsible for some of these measures while others are centrally organized by the DES and other agencies. A recent innovation in relation to quality assurance has been the introduction of whole school evaluation (WSE). The evaluation process involves interrogation of the school system and individual school response in terms of:

- Quality of school management
- Quality of school planning
- Quality of curriculum provision
- Quality of learning and teaching in subjects
- Quality of support for teachers.

The evaluation process involves preparatory preparation and submission of documentation a weeklong school visit and post evaluation reports in the form of verbal and written reports. Final reports from these inspections and evaluations are posted on the DES website and are accessible to the public ([www.education.gov.ie](http://www.education.gov.ie)).

## Establishing and negotiating the direction of school development

### Our Partners / Our Critical Friends



All schools are pivotal in the life of their local communities. Their position is enshrined in education legislation under the following:

Education Act '98, Part V, Section 22. (1) The principal of a recognized school and the teachers in a recognized school, under the direction of the principal, shall have responsibility, in accordance with this Act, for the instruction provided to the students in the school and shall contribute, generally, to the education and personal development of students in that school. Collectively promote co-operation between the school and the community it serves.

"Looking At Our Schools: an aid to self-evaluation for primary and post-primary schools, 2003," suggests that the relationships between the school and the wider community should form one of the self evaluation criteria for schools.

Key points in school evaluation reports refer to:

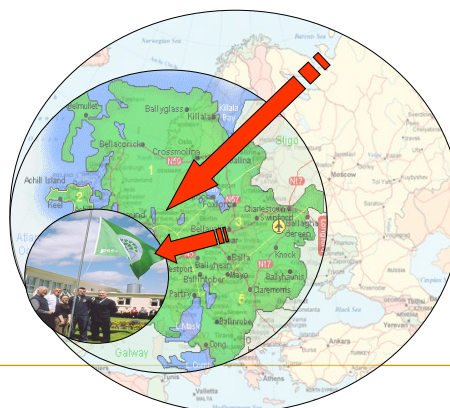
- The quality of partnership with parents
- Their involvement of parents and the quality of the flow of information between school and home
- The frequency of meetings
- Their access to school records and awareness of procedures
- Facilitated and effective collaboration between school and outside agencies, local

organizations, employers, health boards and second or third-level institutions

- Facilitate induction, progression and transfer of pupils
- Engage in regular review, on a partnership basis of its relationship with parents and the wider community

(Circ Letter Post-primary M18/05 and Primary 16/05: The Sharing of School Facilities with the Community, [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie))

## No school an island!



## System leadership and cooperation in networks

### Distributed Leadership / Teacher Professional Development

Our in-school management arrangements agreed for all schools in 1998 and reviewed for primary schools in 2003, recognize the need to share leadership managerial and administrative duties among members of the teaching staff. "The principal, deputy principal and holders of posts of responsibility together form the in-school management team for the school." (DES Circular 4/'98) Within this model teachers take leadership roles in curricular and organizational areas. In recent years Leadership Development for Schools (LDS), a support service for Principals and Deputy Principals, has devised and delivered training programmes for Middle Leaders. Examples of the work undertaken by participants on the programmes can be found at [www.lds21.ie](http://www.lds21.ie). The

programmes stress an action research methodology which requires reflection on current practice, research, planning and implementation of improved teaching practices in the classroom and the school. For further reading on action research in schools please see [www.jeanmcniff.com](http://www.jeanmcniff.com).

Principals of primary and post-primary schools recognize the value of teamwork in their schools. School projects such as the Green School's Project give opportunities for school staffs to work together using a common theme, environmental awareness, to forge strong ties and promote collegiality and shared commitment.

The Home/School/Community/Liaison scheme was begun in 1990. The purpose of the scheme was to build strong relations between school and home. One teacher was freed from class teaching duties in order to visit parents, encourage their participation in their children's education and to further their own educational aims. The scheme stresses the critical role of parents in the education process and aims to respect their role in the education of their children.

Universities such as the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, support the work of schools through their leadership of and facilitation of curricular and school based projects. A compelling account of such initiatives is written up under the title, **TL21 -Teaching and Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**. Please see [www.nuim.ie/TL21](http://www.nuim.ie/TL21) to read the final report of the research and development project, LEARNING ANEW.

Principals and senior school leaders are encouraged by their Trustees, Management bodies and their professional associations to distribute leadership across the school and are facilitated through workshops, seminars and on-going support (newsletters, web discussions etc) in the methodologies most appropriate for their contexts.

### Examples of good practice

The following are accounts of the work done in Action Learning Networks in post primary schools in Ireland. The accounts stress the leadership role taken by staff in schools to improve the learning

environment for students through changes in the curriculum or in methodologies.

**The Donegal ALN** was facilitated by Tom Moore and was the collaborative work of four Vocational Education Committee (VEC) colleges in Co. Donegal, **Mulroy College**, Milford, **Finn Valley College**, Stranorlar, **Magh Ene College** Bundoran and **Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada**, Aranmore Island), who met together as a network. Our focus was on raising academic standards and we decided that the specific area for our project would be **Assessment for Learning (AfL)**.

As a springboard to our action learning project, each individual college undertook a wide range of in-school initiatives to introduce the staff to the concept of AfL and also to incorporate AfL into teaching and learning in each college. Some examples of these initiatives are as follows:

- In-house presentation by teachers on AfL
- Whole staff development day with SDPI facilitator(s)
- Senior Management team meeting
- AfL on agenda of all Subject Department meetings
- Questionnaire to find out what AfL practices are already being used by teachers.

At our ALN network meetings that were very well attended and facilitated by Tom Moore (LDS), we discussed the action plans of our respective colleges and also decided on an ambitious plan to bring all the teachers from the four colleges together to receive further training in the practical implementation of AfL in the classroom and also to share ideas and resources in the various subject departments.

The staff of Oaklands Community College identified SEN as an area to be addressed as part of school development planning 07/08. Our Principal gave a presentation to staff on recent legislative changes regarding SEN provision. Staff also completed an audit of this area and highlighted areas that needed to be addressed. In October 2007 Katherine Bates, (Special Education Support Services) gave a seminar to all staff entitled "Inclusion of Special Education Needs Students in Mainstream – A Whole School Approach". All subject departments subsequently met to discuss differentiated teaching strategies

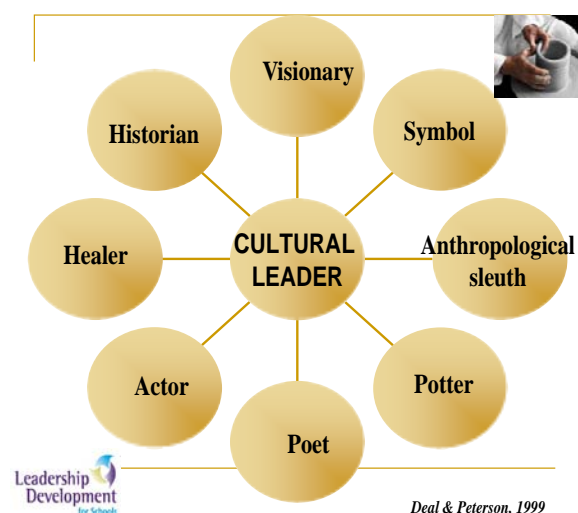
in their respective subject areas. The SDP coordinator met with personnel in the SEN department and a statement of current practice was formulated. The school steering committee subsequently discussed areas for attention as highlighted during the audit by staff and a draft policy which incorporated new initiatives in the SEN department was drawn up. These initiatives addressed inadequacies as highlighted by staff in SEN provision. Following consultation with all the educational partners the draft policy was ratified by our Board of Management. We found the cluster group meeting organised by The Action Learning Network with Mr Padraig Moran, Senior Special Education Needs Officer to be extremely helpful when processing applications for Special Education Needs Students in our school.

#### 4. Recruiting and Educating School Leaders

The leadership style of the principal teacher/school leader has a profound effect on the capacity of their colleagues to deliver high-quality teaching to the students in their care.

The selection of candidates to the position of principal is of central importance to the life of the school and to the development of future leaders within the school community. In common with findings from other European countries, fewer candidates are putting themselves forward for the position. The reasons have been well documented; lack of preparation for the job, responsibilities of the position, legislative demands, workload, lack of administrative help, pressure of inadequate funding and sometimes poorly maintained buildings. The context within which school leaders operate is one of increasing parental and societal expectation of schools and the growing complexity of schools as organizations. These expectations have developed in response to the social and economic demands facing school pupils. Young people who are growing up at a time of rapid social change must also contend with the reality of an economy where employment is increasingly found at the upper end of the value chain and where less opportunities exist for low or un-skilled labour. Internationally, schools are exhorted to move

beyond serving only those with the most powerful advocates to a real commitment to providing a high-quality effective education to all.



Over recent decades several groups and institutions have endeavoured to provide management and leadership development for school leaders in Irish schools. Management bodies, trustees, universities and trade unions have all contributed to progress in the field of leadership development. The establishment of professional association for school leaders in the past decade has added impetus and an increased degree of professionalism to the practice of school leadership ([www.into.ie](http://www.into.ie), [www.ipn.ie](http://www.ipn.ie), [www.asti.ie](http://www.asti.ie), [www.tui.ie](http://www.tui.ie)). Many of these programmes have offered support for leadership development, sometimes with a managerial focus addressing the legal or contractual responsibilities of the management and trustees. Education Centres, unions and professional bodies have tended to provide shorter weekly courses or evening sessions. Increasingly, postgraduate courses leading to diplomas and master's degrees in school leadership and management are being provided by the universities.

In 2002 the Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) team was set up by the Department of Education and Science (DES) to provide a systematic nationally supported programme of professional development for school leaders. The team consists of full-time members seconded from leadership positions in schools, and



associates – practising school leaders who commit time to LDS each year.

LDS aims to develop the capacity of school leaders through the enhancement of knowledge, skills and competencies, attitudes and values, and behaviours. A multi-model approach to delivery includes instructional inputs, sharing of knowledge and experience, reflection and school-based action and research.

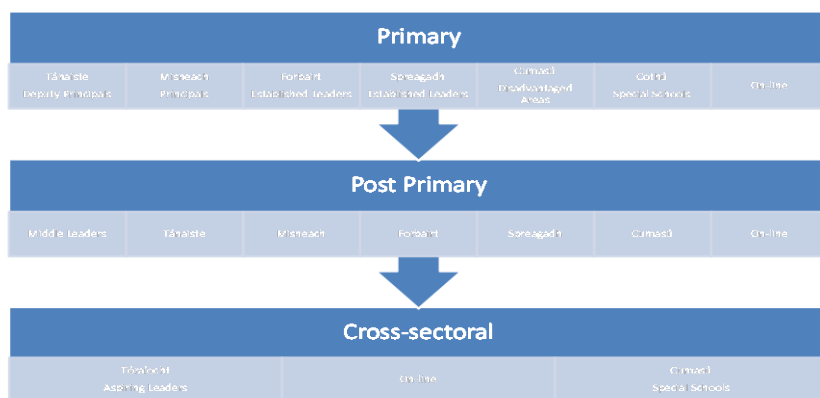
**What the system is doing to recruit leaders**

In 2008, LDS with the National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), and supported financially by the DES, instigated the first accredited programme for aspirant school leaders, Tóraíocht (A Journey). This course, run over the course of a school year, leads to a post-graduate diploma in Educational Leadership. The modules address areas of key importance to a school principal.

[www.lds21.ie](http://www.lds21.ie)



Overview of LDS Programmes

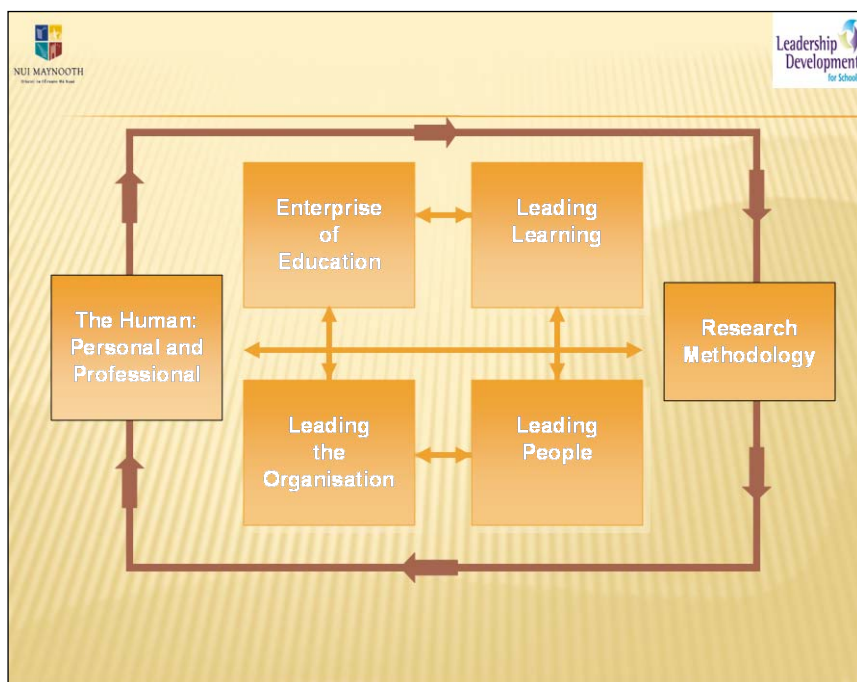


LDS Leadership for Schools 2016 Overview

NUIM and other universities offer post graduate courses up to and including doctoral lever to teachers in order to prepare them for school leadership positions.

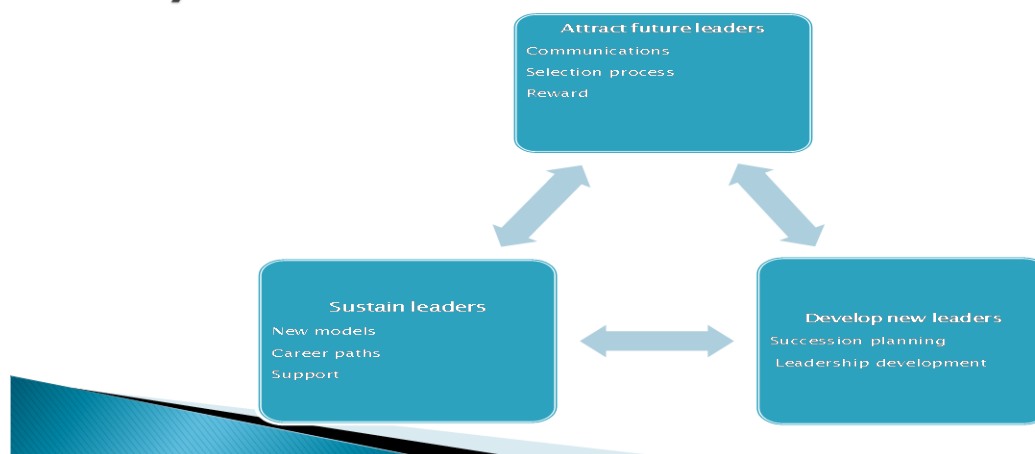
**Attractiveness of school leadership**

Ireland is experiencing a challenge in attracting candidates to school leadership positions. Recent research suggest that these challenges arise from a range of issues, including a wide variety of challenges associated with the role, difficulties in succession planning, concerns related to the selection process and insufficient professional development opportunities. It is recommended that action is needed to address these issues in order to attract talented and effective leaders for the future.



## National structures of pre-service, induction and in-service education of school leaders Teacher Training in Ireland / Colleges of Education

### Key recommendations



In Ireland the system of teacher training differs between primary and second level school teachers and is the responsibility of the Department of Education and Science. Typically second level teachers complete a primary degree at university and then follow up with the Postgraduate Diploma in Education / Higher Diploma in Education (secondary) / again at university.

**Teachers of Religion** are trained at the Mater Dei Institute of Education, Clonliffe road, Dublin 3. This college provides a full-time four-year course leading to a Bachelor of Religious Education degree (B. Rel. Ed.). The Bachelor of Religious Education degree programme comprises Religious Studies, Education and an Arts subject (English, History or Music). Graduates of this course are recognised by the Department of Education and Science for appointment as fully qualified teachers of Religion and the Arts subject.

**Primary school teachers** complete a three year programme, leading to a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree, at one of the five teacher training colleges.

### Coaching and other supports

LDS personnel are actively pursuing the possibility of training for **coaching** with the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) London ([www.ncsl.com](http://www.ncsl.com)), and other colleges in England. The team actively support the development of Action Learning Networks amongst principals with a view to having a supportive environment in which they can unburden themselves of the problematic in their situations. There are obvious skills to be learned for the successful application of those particular resources. It is hoped they can be operational in the coming year. However, the present economic downturn seriously affects the roll-out of this service.

### To sum up: Challenges

- The plight of the teaching principal with dual responsibility for full-time teaching and school leadership
- Increasing accountability and legislation compliance at school level

- Under funding of schools leading to higher pupil-teacher ratio, increasingly more apparent in the recession
- The drive to disperse leadership throughout the school without any effective planning or preparation
- The open-ended nature of the role of principal, with a lack of specific contracts and conditions of employment for school principals

### The future of school leadership

While provision of professional development is not confined solely to the LDS team, their efforts to provide systematic courses for school leaders and especially through their collaboration with NUIM will enhance the capacity of school principals in their work in the coming years.

Despite recent gloomy economic forecasts it is heartening to report that almost 140 teachers have enrolled in the post-graduate diploma course for future school leaders. This course commences on September 4<sup>th</sup> 2009.

## Appendix

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