It is a pleasure for me to be here in Trinity College this evening and I thank Helen O’Sullivan for the invitation to launch the book: ‘Leading and Managing Schools’ and congratulate her and her co-editor, John West-Burnham, their 16 contributors and the publishers, SAGE on this initiative.

It is a book written by professionals for professionals in the education sector on the theme of leading and managing schools. It is a tour d’horizon of the subject matter from different perspectives whose diversity but ultimately whose coherence is a tour de force. It commends itself to everyone in the field of education from policy makers to school leadership teams and to teachers themselves as professionals and members of learning and teaching communities. It is not bed time reading but its style and content render it accessible to a wider audience. That audience might include the more than 20,000 members of school boards whose commendable unpaid volunteerism contributes so much to the fabric of school and community life in Ireland and whose governance role is addressed in the text.

The book is suffused with the themes of change and adaptation. At the global level from the financial crisis, to the ubiquity of information and communications technology to climate change through to the local level of rapidly changing family, student and community structures schools are challenged to adapt. Mainstreaming special needs pupils adds to this challenge. In this text schools are invited not just to search for best practice but to try to invent next practice, to distinguish what is essential from what is expendable and to practice interdependence not just autonomy.

The almost surreal weight of change facing some schools in urban Ireland today is brilliantly captured in the story of Mary Mother of Hope National School in Dublin 15 which catered to the needs of students comprising 46 different nationalities in 2007. It was overwhelmed by enrolment demands in a public policy and planning environment ‘that utterly failed to plan infrastructure’ and by a planning section in the Department (of Education and Science) that ‘was hopelessly ill-equipped to deal with the crisis’. These failures led to ‘trauma that heightened racial discord’. It is a powerful example of a wider phenomenon in Irish public policy, identified by Dr. Eddie Molloy as IDD, implementation deficit disorder.

The real strength of this text, however, is to be found not in the higher reaches of public policy formation but in the inner sanctum of the school as a ‘professional learning community’. It is part road map and part a call to action. Examples of good practice are cited
from Illinois, Ontario and Finland and through an Irish case study facilitated by the book’s co-editor, Helen O’Sullivan. The text most assuredly is not a manifesto for bureaucratic, top down, box-ticking and form-filling managerialism, strong on distributing tasks but not responsibility. This managerial style is wonderfully captured in the phrase ‘tinkering towards utopia’. Rather it calls for learning centred leadership, on-site in schools, strong on monitoring and evaluation and therefore strong on transparency and accountability but light on judgement and aiming to develop effective practices through interventions which are ‘non punitive’. Self-evaluation may act by these means as a catalyst to genuine transformation.

I was fascinated to read of the dearth of interest in many principalships and enquired further. One well-placed source revealed to me instances in some schools where up to 200 applicants were received for teaching posts but only one or two when a vacancy for principal was advertised. The paucity of applicants and the propensity to avail of early retirement where possible speaks loudly of the necessity to critically examine the leadership and managerial role and model in our schools. Since this evidence is anecdotal in character one hesitates to draw any definitive conclusion but this potentially incipient crisis in school leadership, if valid as an emerging trend, needs to be nipped in the bud.

Achieving transformation is easier said than done. Ours is a school culture where teacher independence was uncontested, ‘legendary’ according to one OECD Report. Monitoring and evaluation were ‘foreign to the culture of our schools’, ‘taboo!’ . This process finds expression in an evocative and lonely term: ‘pedagogic solitude’, a kind of professional lifetime in occasionally observed solitary confinement through an external inspectorate system. Learning the skills and methods of collaborative enquiry and the norms as a professional teaching community in a school to value practice over privacy is not mission impossible but probably needs at the outset some external facilitation. Our official discourse in Ireland is replete with references to change and reform but, as reported from research in one of the chapters, in fact ‘little change has occurred in teachers’ beliefs and values’. This again is another example of implementation deficit disorder.

Finland is cited more than once as a model that privileges flexibility over standardisation in curriculum planning by teachers themselves; that builds on schools- based good practice and that trusts teachers more through formative than summative assessment and testing. Finland also I would remind you outscores Ireland in PISA tests and consistently has outperformed Ireland in competitiveness, research and innovation. This has been achieved not through external centralised diktat but through internal practice in schools themselves. The key lies in trusting teacher autonomy, in relying on their professionalism in the context of well led and managed professional learning communities. For this to occur in Ireland, it would require policymakers to make a ‘leap of trust’. Given the evaluation and monitoring elements which are key to the whole school learning model it permits the system to trust but also to verify through measured outcomes and standards.
Speaking some time ago to a Finnish Professor of Education she described our traditional approach to learning and assessment as the ‘bulimic model’ of learning, stuffing our students full of facts and then having them regurgitate same at traditional closed book examinations. Our students deserve better and our schools have the capacity to do better.

The paradigm shift commended in this book as regards school leadership is a breath of fresh air. It is about more than running effective organisations. It suggests a means to create collaborative communities. It cautions against the philosophy of ‘doing things right at the expense of doing the right things’. To close, as the book does in its last chapter, let me finish by quoting Vaclav Havel who sees ‘hope as a state of mind, not a state of the world... a dimension of the soul...’ In these trying times in our country we need such hope. Hope as a state of mind that can rise above the vicissitudes of life not least for those still at school. Tomorrow’s leaders in every field of endeavour already are in today’s classrooms. When schools work at their best they are remarkable expressions of human achievement. While in the development of the whole person in their charge they also are the incubators of a more hopeful future for us all.

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