

Women in Learning & Leadership (WILL)

A network to support and inspire future female leaders in education

Female leaders in Irish education

Sharing leadership stories and experiences is a powerful tool for human connection and growth. They can inspire, build empathy, and enable learning. Building strong relationships through networking can also open doors to new opportunities, collaborations, and invaluable support for a leadership journey.

Ireland has a rich history of female leaders who helped shape the landscape of Irish education. A notable first mention is the late Niamh Bhreathnach, best known as the Minister for Education who abolished third-level fees in 1996. Other attributes of her legacy for progressive educational reform include increases in education spending, the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, and making the Transition Year programme available to all second-level schools. During her time as minister she also introduced the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme, which provoked controversy at the time. Niamh was elected the first woman chairperson of the Labour Party in 1990, and she was a real advocate of the Educate Together movement at a time when the debate on patronage was difficult but vitally important.

Prof. Áine Hyland, former vice president of University College Cork, is another inspiring female leader with a passion for inclusion, a true pioneer in her vision for education at all levels from primary to higher education. Áine was a founder member of the Dalkey School Project during the 1970s, Ireland's first multi-denominational national school since the foundation of the state. She has made an impactful contribution to research, teaching and learning, and to national policy, especially in the areas of investment in education, higher education accreditation, multiple intelligences, and educational disadvantage.



WILL NETWORK



Dr Kathryn Corbett

Co-founder, WILL Network



Rachel O'Connor

Co-founder, WILL Network

Irish education has had many inspirational female leaders. The Women in Learning & Leadership (WILL) Network was set up to share their leadership stories and provide networking opportunities for future leaders in the system. This article describes the importance of sharing leadership stories and the power of networking to inspire future female leaders in education.

For International Women's Day 2023, a momentous panel discussion took place in Maynooth University with a group of female university presidents, which included Dr Linda Doyle (first female provost of Trinity College Dublin), Prof. Kerstin Mey (president of University of Limerick), Prof. Maggie Cusack (president of Munster Technological University), Prof. Eeva Leinonen (president of Maynooth University), and Dr Orla Flynn (president of Atlantic Technological University). Just four years previously, Ireland had not had a single female university president in its 400-year history of higher education. Panel members spoke about their career journey and the importance of developing the pipeline for what comes next for women in leadership in education.

The WILL Network

The education profession in Ireland has a significant female majority, but this is seldom reflected in leadership positions – either in primary, post-primary, further, or higher education. To further explore the barriers and bridges, both personally and professionally, for female leaders in education, the Women in Learning & Leadership (WILL) Network was launched on 8 March 2022. It was founded by Dr Kathryn Corbett, principal of a large senior primary school in Dublin, and Rachel O' Connor, then principal of a large post-primary school in Wexford (her current role is deputy director of the National Association of Principals and Deputies).

The WILL Network was created to provide opportunities for aspiring and inspiring female leaders in education to connect, in order to share their stories about their career journey and leadership style, to discuss their role models, inspirations, and aspirations, and to have important conversations about the sustainability of a leadership role.

We are fortunate that there is no shortage of inspiring female leaders in Irish education. Guest speakers at WILL Network events have included Prof. Patricia Mannix McNamara (head of School of Education, University of Limerick), Dr Lynn Ramsay (director of the Teaching Council), Dr Arlene Foster (director of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment), Niamh Fortune (head of Froebel Department, Maynooth University), Dr Mary Kelly (dean of Hibernia College), Dr Ciara O'Donnell (former director of the Professional Development Service for Teachers), Dr Rachel Farrell (founder of Cyberwise), and Máirín Ní Chéilleacher (assistant secretary general of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation).

Branching out

To broaden perspectives on leadership, the WILL Network has also invited guests from outside the education sector. These have included Claire McGee

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(Ibec), Maria Walsh MEP, Marguerite Brosnan (CEO of AXA Ireland), Mary Mitchell O'Connor (former Minister of State), Grace Fanning (captain of an Irish naval ship), and Verona Murphy TD. All have generously shared their leadership experiences and habits and talked about the significance of authenticity, creativity, and resilience.

After just two years, the WILL Network has over 2,000 members. It aims to be both responsive and creative in providing a range of connection opportunities for members:

WILL Chats is a live, online, podcast-style conversation with female-leader guest speakers from education, politics, business, and other sectors. Topics have included role models, motivation, sustainable leadership, and women's health.

WILL Clicks is a monthly e-newsletter with relevant leadership finds (such as new resources or information), book reviews, and a spotlight on members' leadership journeys.

WILL Brunch is an in-person event that takes place three times a year. Guest speakers are invited to share their insights on a particular leadership theme.

WILL Chapters is the network's book club. Leadership reads are discussed and shared on a live social-media feed.

Much has been written recently about leadership sustainability in the education sector. Gender is an important aspect of this conversation. While there are many inspirational female leaders in education in Ireland, there is huge value in providing a network where their stories can highlight the real and perceived barriers that exist for women, and how these barriers can be addressed at system level and in terms of leadership professional learning and development. As the saying goes, 'True leaders don't create followers. They create more leaders.'

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