



Díospóireachtaí Parlaiminte
Parliamentary Debates

Page 2 of 4 Thursday, 22 October 2009

The Joint Committee met at 10.10 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Frank Feighan, Deputy Brian Hayes, Deputy Thomas McEllistrim, Deputy John O'Mahony, Deputy Ruairí Quinn,	Senator Cecilia Keaveney.
---	---------------------------

In attendance: Senator Dan Boyle.

DEPUTY PAUL GOGARTY IN THE CHAIR.

The joint committee met in private session until 10.15 a.m.

Education Spending: Discussion with Post-Primary Education Forum.

Chairman: I welcome the following: Mr. Jim Moore and Mr. Paul Beddy, president and director, respectively, of the National Parents Council Post-primary; Ms Deirdre Keogh, development officer, Irish Vocational Education Committee; Mr. Diarmuid de Paor, deputy general secretary, Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland; Mr. Noel Merrick, president, Joint Managerial Body-Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools; Mr. Ciaran Flynn, general secretary, Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools; and Mr. Declan Glynn, assistant general secretary, Teachers Union of Ireland. They are here under the umbrella body of the Post-Primary Education Forum. We will examine the effects of the changes in education spending, as well as the importance of protecting investment in education, while maximising the efficient use of existing resources, which is important in these straitened times. In this context, Mr. Moore will make the main presentation but, first, I invite Mr. Beddy to make a brief introductory comment.

Mr. Paul Beddy: I will outline additional background information on the forum. Mr. Moore and I are ordinary parents representing parents nationally. The Post-Primary Education Forum is unique in that it has brought together all the partners in education. What brings us together is our common interests in education. In many respects, we are all passionate about education, as I am sure are the members of the committee.

From parents' perspective, the National Parents Council examined how parents could become more involved, as they have been on the periphery of education matters for many years. Even though it has a representational role, the council is very badly resourced. There is a misconception that parents are somewhat apathetic about what happens in second level education. We believe this is untrue. It is borne out of the fact that parents are not very well organised at second level, unlike at primary level. They are not very well organised mainly because they are not funded. The council does not have the necessary resources. We have our day jobs and our job representing parents. It starts at the basic parents association level

and continues through to representative roles at national level and the National Parents Council Post-primary.

In regard to our having a passion for education, the three ideas that come to mind are passion, vision and leadership within education. Within this forum, everybody is very passionate about the idea that education is important. When we got together, we said we had more issues in common than issues that divided us. The biggest single issue that is common to us all is funding for education and the priority it should be given. Studies show that more parental involvement in education brings more benefits right through the education system from local school level.

We want to emphasise that when we talk about investment in education within the forum, that is our concern. Our concerns are not related to teacher or individual management issues. They are separate from what the forum is about. It is about what is common to us all. The funding issue is of critical importance to us and we are passionate about the matter. We are glad of this opportunity to indicate the impact of the cutbacks. Our membership includes principals, management bodies, parents and teacher union organisations. I will hand over to my colleague, Mr. Moore, who will present our submission.

Chairman: I remind the delegates that members of the committee have absolute privilege but this same privilege does not apply to witnesses appearing before the committee. While I doubt the delegates will be seeking to defame anyone today, I must mention that warning nevertheless. Members are advised of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

Mr. Jim Moore: I thank members for giving us the opportunity to address the committee. As Mr. Beddy outlined, the Post Primary Education Forum, PPEF, was established as an umbrella group consisting of parents, trade unions and management bodies at second level. It was founded in November 2007 to address common issues and establish a shared viewpoint on priorities for the future development of second level education. It was founded in a context in which, in a time of plenty, Ireland languished towards the bottom of OECD tables in terms of investment in schools.

The PPEF is a unique and significant development in which the partners got together for the first time to promote the interests of children in second level schools. In the autumn of last year everything changed, but we believe our role and mission became more important. In this time of recession investment in education is crucial for economic recovery. Cuts already made are having a serious and negative impact in schools and if we are truly committed to the development of a knowledge economy, we must not only reverse these cuts but also increase investment in our children. In this presentation we will outline the effects that the cuts already imposed are having on the education of our children in second level schools. We will outline how the cuts are having the most devastating and irreversible effect on the most disadvantaged of our children. We will argue that in order to protect our economic and social well-being, our children in second level education must be protected from further attack.

By way of dealing with the cuts, four of our member organisations have conducted surveys of schools to find out exactly what is happening. The findings are remarkably consistent: larger class sizes; subjects dropped; amalgamation of higher and lower classes and different year groups; whole programmes dropped; and increased pressure on extra-curricular activities and pastoral care. The surveys point to two particularly worrying trends. The first of these is the fact that many of the subjects being dropped and amalgamated are those that are regarded as the most important for developing the knowledge economy. Among the

subjects schools have been forced to drop are chemistry, physics, applied maths, economics, accountancy, agricultural science, French and German. With approximately 10% of schools losing a modern language and 8% a science subject, it is clear that the cuts are having a negative impact on the capacity of schools to produce the modern well educated and flexible workforce so necessary for economic recovery. Amalgamation of higher and lower level classes in such subjects as mathematics, French and business studies is a further negative consequence of the reduction in teacher numbers. These trends are accompanied by increases in class sizes as a result of the increase in the pupil-teacher ratio. Ireland is close to becoming the country with the largest second level class sizes in the OECD.

The moratorium on filling middle management posts is already having a devastating effect in schools and there is worse to come. The nature of such a moratorium means that the effect is uneven; some schools have lost up to seven assistant principals. Non-replacement of post-holders is placing enormous pressure on the running of schools and the care of our children. Systems that have proven of great benefit to the provision of a safe and supportive environment for our children such as the year head system are under serious threat.

Many of the cuts are hitting the most vulnerable and disadvantaged of our children. Increases in school transport costs and the abolition of the school book grants scheme in non-DEIS schools are among the most obvious of these. Hard pressed parents are finding themselves with anything from a few hundred euro to more than €1,000 in extra expenses at the start of the school year. It is very important to remember that most disadvantaged students do not attend DEIS schools.

One of the most worrying trends from the surveys is the number of schools that have had to drop programmes such as the applied leaving certificate, the leaving certificate vocational programme and even the transition year programme. The abolition of the applied leaving certificate programme in many schools will not only have serious consequences for those children who availed of the programme, it will also have a negative impact on those classes that these students now join. They will find it more difficult to cope in the larger classes pursuing the traditional leaving certificate programme. Teachers will have to pay disproportionate amounts of attention to students who were better suited to the applied leaving certificate programme.

Increased class sizes and amalgamation of higher and lower level classes also have a disproportionate effect on those students who are having difficulties. Many schools have had to abolish smaller classes designed for students who are struggling with the curriculum. The loss of home-school liaison teachers in non-DEIS schools is having a particularly detrimental effect on some very vulnerable children for whom attendance at school at all is the first priority. This link with families has proved invaluable in retaining children in school and helping them to achieve their potential. It costs ten times more to provide a prison place than to support a child in a second level school.

It is only fair that we take this opportunity to acknowledge the commitments in the recently renegotiated programme for Government. The steps taken to employ more teachers and reintroduce some of the grants withdrawn in the budget for 2009 are to be welcomed. The PPEF is anxiously awaiting an outline of the exact details of the grants being made available under the renewed programme for such areas as the book scheme, subjects and programmes. However, this should not be taken as meaning that the second level education system is adequately funded; it is not. We have lost 900 teaching posts this year. Putting back 100 in a year is a gesture. Ireland was lagging far behind its European and world competitors in terms of investment in second level students even in the days of the boom. Circumstances have worsened since. This is a short-sighted policy.

The education cutbacks are placing enormous financial burdens on already hard pressed parents. For many parents, the increases in the cost of school transport, the loss of book grants and more pressure from cash strapped schools are turning the provision of education for their children into a struggle. The National Parents Council Post-primary has estimated that the additional burden on families arising from cuts in education can be as much as €1,000 per child in second level education. If a family has more than one child in full-time education, this cost is inevitably multiplied. These figures do not take account of changes in taxation which apply to these families. In this context, the PPEF is calling for proper funding to be put in place to support the work of the National Parents Council Post-primary. The council speaks for the parents of 340,000 pupils attending second level schools. It is vital to the future of the education system that the modest funding sought by this body be provided in order that parents can have a strong and influential voice in the future development of schools to fulfil their role under the Education Act 1998.

The arguments surrounding the importance for our economic future of maintaining a high quality education system have been well rehearsed and we are not going to repeat all of them here. However, it is worth examining the consequences of increasing or reducing our commitment to the education of our children. If we support our schools, our teachers, our parents and, above all, our children at this crucial time in their lives, the consequences are positive and profound. If we fail to provide this support, the consequences are unthinkable.

The OECD has consistently reported that investment in education provides a significant economic return both to the individual and society at large. It also points out that there is a significant social return from investment in education, pointing out that better educated people live longer, are healthier, more socially cohesive and are more informed and effective citizens. The stark statistic which shows that more 90% of the inmates of our prisons are early school leavers speaks for itself.

Key figures such as Jim O'Hara of Intel, Martin Murphy of Hewlett Packard and Paul Rellis of Microsoft have called on the Government for increased investment in education in general and in information and communications technology, in particular, as a vital component in Ireland's economic recovery. Investment in education will always pay dividends.

It cannot be emphasised enough that the teenagers in our schools today have only one chance to get the best education possible. If they are to realise their full potential, it is no use coming to them in ten or 15 years to offer them a second level education. The damage will have been done and for many of them, it will be irreparable. We understand that Ireland is facing difficult economic times. We know that money is tight. However, apart from the fact that education will be central to our recovery, we cannot punish a generation for the sins of their predecessors. More than that, we owe them the best possible chance to achieve the best they can in life. These young men and women, members children and mine, will not forgive our generation if we deny them this one chance.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Moore. I now invite members of the Opposition and Government parties to ask questions or make comments. This is a crucial issue so I would welcome any comments, however harsh they may be. I would also welcome the involvement of everyone here. I call Deputy Brian Hayes.

Deputy Brian Hayes: I thank the Chairman. I attended the MacGill summer school this year and heard the much publicised speech of Professor Thornhill, the former Secretary General of the Department of Education and Science. One of the most important points he made in that speech was that one of the great strengths in the post-primary education system is the diversity which exists - the fact there is, effectively, parental choice. We have a

diverse system which has grown up over the years. We need to recognise that as a real strength in our system. However, one of the downsides of that is that frequently people do not speak with one voice in terms of the funding requirements for post-primary education. Those of us who are policy-makers, whether Government or Opposition, frequently find it difficult to establish exactly what is required.

I very much welcome the fact the Post Primary Education Forum has come together as a group representing all interests in post-primary education. That has not happened before. It is very important at this time of such financial adjustment in the country that the education partners speak with one voice. Too often we have seen people played off against each other. The Department of Education and Science is happy with that, namely, that one side plays off against another as little deals are done behind closed doors and people feel miffed when the deal is ultimately negotiated. The interests in post-primary education have come together to make this presentation to the committee, which I and my party appreciate. However, they should keep doing so because we need to hear them speak as one.

In the revised programme for Government, a commitment was given to increase the number of teachers by 150 each year over the next three years without changing the class schedule. Have the witnesses been given an undertaking from Government as to the make up of the 150 teachers year on year? I understood the breakdown was 50-50 between primary and post-primary but the Minister of State, Deputy John Moloney, told me in the Dáil this week that it had yet to be worked out. Will the witnesses give evidence as to their understanding of the commitment and the discussions they have had with Government to date? Is it a 50-50 breakdown?

I refer to subject choice. It was stated that 8% of all schools have lost a science subject. That is devastating information. We need to follow this up with the Department of Education and Science which has had the enrolment and the subject figures from each post-primary school in the country since 30 September last. At a time when we need to radically improve our performance in science and, in particular, in maths, it is extraordinary that the evidence to this committee from witnesses is that 8% of post-primary schools have dropped a science subject. That is the outcome of the loss of 800-900 posts in post-primary.

The following suggestion was made by the Secretary General of the Department of Education and Science, Brigid McManus, at the NAPD conference in Galway last week. Has any attempt been made at post-primary level to bring schools together in catchment areas to offer increased subject choices? I visited a number of schools in Manchester and Birmingham over the past 12 months and was impressed with how local schools work together to offer a variety of subjects to senior cycle students - children of 15 years of age and upwards - as they approach the equivalent of the leaving certificate.

If we are to come through this very difficult adjustment, we must think outside the box. We must be radical and offer our students every opportunity. If that means taking a subject in another school, we must work that into the system. I would be interested to hear the witnesses position on that because the view of the Secretary General, as published last week at the NAPD conference, is that this is not happening. Why is this not happening? What are the bottlenecks? Can we make some progress on that?

In regard to principals and the loss of posts, the Minister admitted to me in the Dáil this week that at least one in ten principals in post-primary schools has retired in the first ten months of this year. That is an extraordinary admission and an extraordinary loss of leadership. He went on to admit to me that more than 500 posts have been lost at assistant principal and special duty level. Previously, assistant principals were year heads but those positions are now being filled by people who have special duty positions. Since the

moratorium, we cannot fill those positions. In the first ten months of this year alone, we have lost 500 of those posts which cannot be replaced. I would be interested to hear the witnesses evidence on the impact it is having in schools.

I speak to many parents and an issue for them is information from schools. I have no faith in the whole school evaluation process because it tells parents nothing. The information it gives on the website is written in such a way that it is not understandable. The intervals between whole school evaluations might be ten or 11 years, so what information is provided for parents? My party has taken a position that schools should publish a yearly reports for parents providing all information, including information on debates, sports, examination results and on how children do in one subject as opposed to another.

If everyone is against the kind of league tables produced by the main newspapers simply on the basis of participation in higher level education, the logical response is, why can we not put something better in its place? The only way forward is to have a school report which is available for the school community, in particular, parents, which can be done a yearly basis and which can simply flood the system with information. That is the only way to do it if people are really serious about arguing against the kind of league tables we read in the *Irish Independent* and *The Irish Times* each year. If people honestly believe we need a better system, then we must devise a better one. We need yearly school reports up to which all of the partners can sign.

Chairman: We will move on to Deputy Ruairí Quinn in a moment but Deputy Brian Hayes has asked many questions. I am not sure how such a large delegation will answer them. Perhaps the National Parents Council would refer to the issue of whole-school evaluation and the teacher unions would address any correspondence they may have received in terms of circulars from the Department of Education and Science regarding the workings of the new arrangement.

Mr. Jim Moore: I thank Deputy Brian Hayes for his complimentary words about the post-primary education forum. It was an initiative that was started by parents to bring together all our partners in education to find common ground and give direction to where we want to place education in society and in future Government policy.

On the issues he raised on whole-school evaluation, generally parents welcome the increased information available. At this stage there are approximately 240 whole-school evaluation reports. We have campaigned for a long time to resource parents and parents' associations to be more effective in their role within the schools and one of the shortcomings we have found within the National Parents Council movement is getting parents involved at local level, and informing, training, advising and mentoring them to fulfil their obligations as well as their responsibilities in the management of schools. We would welcome any development that would highlight the school performance, but most importantly, we want to see that parents are engaged more fully in the day-to-day activities in schools, and that is not happening.

As part of our presentation today, we look for that support mechanism to the National Parents Council. We have been very good in developing policy with regard to where the National Parents Council and the parents should fit into the Education Act 1998. We have certainly not addressed the issue of how we resource parents in fulfilling that role.

That role starts at the school level. It starts at the day-to-day management level, and contributing positively to the board of management activities and supporting the senior management within schools. If one supports at that level, then one is certainly part of the reporting systems and mechanisms. We would welcome any development of the whole-

school evaluation system that would address the issues and the reporting more regularly than was envisaged in the whole-school evaluation.

Chairman: There may be a difference of opinion on that from the ASTI or the TUI, but I do not want to get into a debate on that.

Mr. Diarmuid De Paor: Before I go on to the issue of the new teachers announced in the programme for Government review, I support the view that the best way to provide information is to empower the school communities. Therefore, we all would support the call from the National Parents Council for some form of funding to get it established so that it can fulfil its role under the Education Act 1998.

The Irish union of second-level students is trying to revive itself at present and speaks of its embarrassment going to international conferences, where everybody else is funded by their Governments and they are begging for scraps, and where they owe thousands of euro because they have no funding line.

On the question Deputy Brian Hayes asked about the number of new teachers and what the Department has stated, the Department has written to the unions asking us to talk to it about what way this should play out. The first teachers were to come on stream in January and, therefore, it is a fairly urgent matter. As sometimes matters in Departments such as the Department of Education and Science move quite slowly, we need to get a system in place fairly quickly on that.

Since the second-level system has lost 900 out of approximately 25,000 teachers and primary has lost 400 out of 30,000 odd, we certainly hope that it is not done on a 50:50 basis because we have lost more teachers and the effects are different and more complex at second level.

Deputy Brian Hayes: There is no agreement.

Mr. Diarmuid De Paor: There is no agreement. The letter from the Department arrived only the other day. We will talk to the Department and try to come up with suggestions and come to agreement. The second-level unions, for whom I think I can speak, will work together to ensure that it is done in the fairest way where those teachers are put in the schools where they are needed most, whether that is through looking at schools which are outside the DEIS scheme to see can more be brought in there or looking at the schools that have lost most teachers to see whether one could put them back that way proportionally.

There will be 100 teachers offered in January, and 900 have gone. That is 900 in a context where the school population has increased by 3,500 already and where it is likely to increase by the same amount again next year. The net effect, in terms of the numbers of teachers per student, is quite dramatic and is having the effects that were outlined in the report.

Mr. Declan Glynn: I would add that 100 teachers being offered next January to post-primary schools represents a teacher per seven schools, and it is entirely inadequate. The context is that the bulge in student numbers through primary into second level is about to commence in an unprecedented way. Student numbers at second level will spiral by 30% over the next 20 years and we will move from a second-level population of 340,000 students to 440,000. The rate of attrition of teachers will worsen over time unless we take cognisance of these demographics. There was a record birth rate in 2007, the highest since-----

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Since 1896.

Mr. Declan Glynn: Exactly. Those issues need to be borne in mind.

In the primary sector teachers are lost on the basis of a teacher per 27 students but in the post-primary sector they are lost on the basis of a teacher per 17 students, or per 16 students in the PLC further education sector, and we must build-in a counterpoise to that. On the criteria that might be established ultimately, there must be a strong weighting on the vulnerable and on the disadvantaged and where posts for the disadvantaged outside the DEIS scheme have been retracted from schools, because it is the most vulnerable and most needy of students whose needs we must cater for first.

Mr. Ciarán Flynn: On the knowledge point, the first question Deputy Brian Hayes asked, we, the management bodies, got a similar letter to the trade unions and the return date for our opinions is 29 October.

Deputy Brian Hayes: Is that on the 200 teachers?

Mr. Ciarán Flynn: Yes.

Deputy Brian Hayes: On the question of the 150 teachers each year for the next three years, there is no agreement either.

Chairman: For the purposes of clarification, a circular was issued and the criteria will be set in place after the Department has received submissions from all of the education partners, and that will continue for each year.

Mr. Ciarán Flynn: We are being consulted on that at present. I would certainly agree with what Mr. Glynn stated on the criteria. For example, in our sector 20 out of 92 schools lost DAS and, therefore, lost home school liaison teachers, and so on.

On the loss of subjects, we also must take into account that there is a loss of programmes as well. For example, 25% of the schools in our sector - I am not sure to what extent this applies to the other sectors - have discontinued LCA in fifth year this year. That is a massive change, as the committee can imagine, and a significant loss to the children attending those schools.

On the question on the sharing of teachers, that happens in a small number of instances, usually in small towns where there is good co-operation between the schools. The opportunity for it to happen in other schools is quite difficult to manage, particularly in terms of the logistics of moving kids and teachers between schools. It is not as simple as it looks on paper. It is not impossible to do and we certainly should look at it for the minority subjects such as applied mathematics, physics and chemistry. There is no problem with any school trying to do that, but there are practical difficulties. The difficulty was in trying to do it so quickly after the change. Now that it is out there in the public domain, it will happen much quicker.

To return to Deputy Hayes' figures on principal, deputy principal and assistant principal losses, the figures he got from the Minister were for voluntary secondary schools and community and comprehensive schools.

Deputy Brian Hayes: They did not include the VEC sector.

Mr. Ciarán Flynn: Our figures for the total would be 220 principals and deputy principals across the three sectors, and 1,000 assistant principals across the three sectors. Obviously, that is compounded by the fact that many of those who will get the principal and deputy

principal posts will come from assistant principalships, and, therefore, that is a further 220 lost to the system. It is having an uneven effect. For example, we have schools who have lost seven assistant principals, which just has the entire middle management devastated. We have had no comeback from the Department on that.

Returning to Mr. Glynn's point, we need to put it in context. There are 100 teachers coming to more than 730 schools, which equates on average to three hours' teaching per school.

Mr. Noel Merrick: On the loss of principals, deputy principals and various assistant principal posts, we have lost a huge amount of experience and talent from our schools. Some 220 principals and deputy principals have gone this year. Long before the moratorium the post of principal was becoming untenable because of the workload involved. The situation has been shocking for many years, with people working 60 to 80 hours per week in an effort to ensure their schools remain open. The moratorium has made it impossible to operate.

Many schools have lost their year heads and these people do invaluable work in keeping school populations going. We have a school with 800 students and without someone to look after each year group, it is not possible for a principal and deputy principal to care for all of them. There are many issues which arise when one has so many young people gathered together in a school. Schools have lost three, four, five or six year heads, those who draw up timetables, examination secretaries and those who cater for special needs. Once a post is lost, that is it. Everything falls back on the principal or deputy principal to try to keep the show on the road. This makes life impossible for them. It also affects the value of the education being delivered because if certain things are not being done, everybody will quickly notice that. The quality of the experience in schools will be affected to a large degree as a result.
