

13 November, 2014 - Minister for Education and Skills addresses conference of the Principals and Deputy Principals Association

It is a pleasure to join you here today for the National Conference of the Principals and Deputy Principals Association.

I would like to thank your Treasurer, Stephen Goulding and your President Brian Ó Maoilchiaráin for the invitation to join you here today.

Structures that are designed to support school leadership are an essential element of our school system. I welcome the opportunity to engage with school leaders through management bodies, through associations of school leaders, and of course through union groups such as this one.

Of course, it is also my pleasure to welcome you all to Limerick!

I had intended to devote most of my remarks here today to how we could seek to develop leadership in our schools, and to future investment in the education system.

Given the events of this week, I think it is also appropriate to spend a few minutes discussing developments relating to reform of the junior cycle.

Leadership development

First though, I would like to talk about leadership development in Irish education.

The quality of leadership is central to the setting of direction in a school and the achievement of good education outcomes for students.

The primary purpose of school leadership is to create and sustain an environment that is conducive to good learning.

Effective school leadership is inclusive – not power dictated from one person, but a responsibility shared across a range of people.

Those people must have a shared understanding and commitment to transform educational quality, and to make change happen regardless of changing contexts.

The expectations and demands being made of school leaders have increased.

The range of social issues which impact upon our schools has become more complex.

We must focus on developing leadership skills to support you in dealing with that greater complexity.

Leadership development, like teachers' professional development, needs to be regarded as a continuum.

From initial leadership training, through induction and on to in-career training, the development of a school leader's skills needs to continually evolve.

My Department has been considering school leadership across that continuum for some months now, exploring how we can share expertise amongst school leaders.

We are reviewing current leadership supports for schools.

In doing so we are seeking to address the needs of those who are preparing for leadership roles, those who may be newly appointed to such roles, and also those who are longer serving school leaders.

In this regard, my officials have been in dialogue with the NAPD and IPPN, to see how we can utilise the strengths of those organisations to better support school leadership.

We have now reached broad agreement with them on the issues that need to be addressed, and I'm confident we will be able to make a public announcement on this area very soon.

We continue to make significant investment in leadership development programmes.

This is done directly through our support services, and through the work of the Education Partners, including the TUI.

This training is at the very centre of implementing curricular change.

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) currently provides a range of professional development programmes for school leaders through dedicated leadership and planning programmes.

Almost 1,200 teachers and school leaders participate in these programmes each year.

The Teaching Council's work is also aimed at raising standards at all levels of the teaching profession. When the Teaching Council Act is fully operational, it will add significantly to the capacity of teachers to both teach and lead within their schools.

You will all be familiar with the broad range of CPD which my Department provides.

I am aware that the demands created by national strategies and priorities can be difficult to manage.

But there are also new opportunities open to us.

Technological developments in particular open up fresh capacity for our CPD providers – put bluntly, they will have to embrace this challenge.

As school leaders, you play a key role in facilitating teachers' participation in and attendance at CPD which is greatly appreciated.

The CPD provided aims to be relevant, timely and appropriate to the needs of teachers, to support them in facilitating and achieving good learning outcomes.

At this juncture, I must say that I regret the fact that many of your teachers are currently unable to attend CPD relating to the junior cycle.

I would like to commend the PDA for facilitating a presentation from Dr. Pdraig Kirk of the Junior Cycle team tomorrow, who will outline the CPD being offered to support the reform of the Junior Cycle.

I have heard reports of teachers showing up to attend CPD, and receiving phone-calls to tell them the union is aware they are breaching the directive which has been issued to members, and asking them to leave the training sessions immediately.

I think this is unfortunate.

Regardless of our disagreements, blocking teachers from having the opportunity to deepen their own professional learning does a disservice to those teachers, and to their students.

I will return to the topic of junior cycle, but first I want to address the recent budget, and our need to work together to identify priorities for future investment.

Investing in Education

My focus in the recent budget was on obtaining the additional funding that was necessary to provide for the demographic growth in the education system.

This is now in place.

For the first time in recent years, the education budget will now rise during 2015 – by €60m.

This funding will help provide for 900 new classroom teachers, 480 new resource teachers and 365 new Special Needs Assistant posts.

Reform of the education system is also being funded. In 2015, we will spend €13.8m on implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategy.

€9.3m has been ring-fenced to support junior cycle, while €3m has been provided to ensure that the high-speed broadband that has been installed in your schools, is paid for by the state.

While not immediately relevant to your schools, I was also very pleased to secure €600,000 to allow for the immediate recruitment of a new team of early childhood education inspectors.

The new team will work with the early childhood sector to promote and enhance good educational practice.

For the first time in recent years, I was also able to secure funding for capital projects in universities, and for investment to improve the facilities and equipment available in Institutes of Technology.

I know the education system needs more than this.

At my initial meetings with each of the education partners, including the TUI, I spoke about the need to consider what areas should be a priority as we seek an educational dividend from a growing economy.

Each of the education partners that I have met have their own set of priorities.

In the school sector these priorities include pay restoration, reductions in pupil-teacher ratios, increases to capitation, and the restoration of ex-quota guidance counsellors in schools.

And once I look to other areas, the list of demands gets longer.

Funding of third level, investment in early years, funding for further education capital and apprenticeships, and investment in technology have all been strongly argued for also.

Taken individually, almost every single one of these measures is deserving of additional funding.

But it is not, and never will be, possible to satisfy all of the demands of the education system at one time.

Hence the need to identify priorities.

A message that has come clearly to me is the concern about school leadership and the workload of school principals in particular.

I have previously acknowledged those concerns, and the impact of the moratorium on middle management posts.

Before the moratorium 53% of teachers in our primary and post-primary schools held a management post.

The moratorium has reduced that to just under 40%.

I think it is fair to say that the workload issue and pressure on Principals and Deputy Principals existed before the moratorium, notwithstanding the fact that one out of every two teachers in post-primary schools held a management allowance.

For that reason I think it would be too simplistic to address your concerns by simply lifting the moratorium as extra funding becomes available in future years.

That is why I welcome the ETBI publication on 21st Century School Management Systems, which advocates change along the lines of the structures in New South Wales and the proposals published jointly by JMB and ACCS.

There is more work to be done in relation to these proposals and they will be the subject of more detailed discussions between my Department and the management bodies in the coming weeks.

Before additional funding can be allocated we need to be clear on the necessary changes that must happen and be accepted by all, including the teacher unions.

More of the same will not improve how leadership is distributed in our schools.

Junior Cycle

This isn't the forum for a detailed discussion on reform of the junior cycle.

But given the events of this week, I don't think I can speak to an audience such as this without touching upon the issue.

In early September, I met with ASTI and TUI to discuss this topic.

It was accepted by all sides that reform had begun with the rollout of the revised English specification.

We agreed to meet again, and at our second meeting we agreed to the appointment of Dr. Pauric Travers to independently chair discussions between the Department and the unions.

The unions proposed terms of reference for those discussions, and a timeframe for the talks to conclude – I was happy to agree to both of these.

In meeting with me, the unions articulated their concerns – particularly around assessment and certification of the reformed junior cycle.

I undertook to reflect on those concerns, and during the talks over recent days, Department officials tabled a compromise set of proposals which I hoped would address those concerns.

I sincerely hope that those compromise proposals will be considered by teachers across the country over the coming weeks.

I firmly believe the basis is there for an agreement.

Conclusion

It has been a pleasure to join you here today, and it's always a pleasure to invite important groups to Limerick!

There is a lot of work we must do over the coming years – to support school leaders, to invest in education, and to reform the education system to improve the education offered to students.

I look forward to working with you to complete this work.

ENDS

- See more at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Speeches/2014-Speeches/SP14-11-13.html#sthash.sodC4lGr.EFJRMR1Q.dpuf>