

Presidential Address Convention 2019

Presidential Address to the Annual Convention of Community and Comprehensive Schools, held in the Slieve Russell Golf and Country Club, Ballyconnell, Co. Cavan by Mr. Paul Fiorentini, Uachtarán, Cumann na Scoileanna Pobail agus Cuimsitheacha.

Ba mhaithe liom fáilte a chur roimh gach duine agaibh chuig Chomhdáil Bhliantuil de Chumann na Scoileanna pobail agus Chuimsitheacha. Cuirimid Fáilte specialta roimh an t-aire Oideachais agus Scilleana, an t-uasal Seosamh MacAodh TD, agus Oifige eile na Roinne atá anseo inniu agus roimh ár n-aíonna.

Tá súil agam go bhfaighidh tú an comhdáil spreagúil agus taitneamhach.

Good afternoon. It is my pleasure to welcome you all to Cavan to the 37th Annual Convention of Community & Comprehensive Schools. Our Theme - Promoting Creativity and Engagement in Schools – reflects a core value of ACCS and we applaud our schools on how they pursue that value.

On behalf of ACCS I am delighted to welcome Joe McHugh T.D., Minister for Education and Skills but also on a personal note it is my pleasure to welcome the Minister as a compatriot from my own county Donegal and we appreciate the commitment to be with us today, not just because of the normal busy schedule but because we also understand that this is a significant time nationally with the pressures created by Brexit. I also extend a warm ACCS welcome to the officials from your Department and thank them for their continued engagement with us and the work they do to support our work. To our guests and friends from the partners I extend a warm welcome and to those of you who are representing schools and boards from the other Sectors I would like to take the opportunity to applaud your school boards, principals and staff who like so many of our own schools managed tragedy and trauma in recent times which illustrates the centrality of schools in our communities.

I think credit is due to the Minister who before he became the Minister for Education and Skills set himself up as an example of lifelong learning and as an example of how it is possible to rediscover the richness of culture and heritage but also of expression through the native language. I'm not sure if you had a crystal ball telling you this would be extremely useful ach Comhghairdeas leatsa Aire mar sin féin.

I am sure that by now the Minister has fully appreciated the complexity of his Department, covering educational provision from Primary, Post-Primary, Third Level, Further Education and most recently Early Years. It is a testament to us as a nation that we are attempting to meet the needs of learners across this huge continuum and a recognition of the value that Ireland as a nation historically has placed on education.

I have a poster framed just inside the entrance of our own school with a picture of a 19th Century schoolhouse, teacher and pupils with the caption

“Even in our worst struggles our forefathers knew that part of our advancement and growth began with a sound education”.

So what is a ‘sound education’? I think it is important to reflect on where we are currently positioned and also to remember that whereas we may have a very ancient culture and heritage, we are a very young nation – not quite 100 years old. We were famously told in 1964 that **‘The Times They are a Changin’**. In reality we now know that the times never stop changing. When we sat our final exams there was no distraction from social media and we couldn't google the answers. Opinions have obviously changed on what constitutes a sound education. Circumstances have certainly changed as to who should be able to access a “sound education”. It is just over 50 years since Donogh O'Malley introduced free education which itself must be one of the most dynamic change factors in the history of the state.

As we continue with Junior Cycle reform and step cautiously onto Senior Cycle review and reform, there will undoubtedly again be heated debate about what a “sound education” should look like. Lines have been drawn over History and Geography. When we look at Senior Cycle reform we need to be careful to measure the benefits of what can and should be retained and what needs to be introduced. Over the past 20 years we have advanced so far in our understanding of child pedagogy, different intelligences, different learning styles, different teaching methodologies and perhaps most significantly we have come to appreciate the complexity of the individual child and the external factors that determine the difference between school success or failure or the factors supporting access to education.

The inclusion of P.E., Politics and Society and Coding are to be welcomed and our schools have embraced these opportunities. So as we begin to forensically examine the Leaving Certificate, it is sobering to note that all of us in this room are products of the Leaving Cert. We are where we are because of the Leaving Cert. – therefore it can't be all bad! Professor Mark Fennell reminds us, as does John Hattie that there is a place for memory skills and retention of detail and that this has to be complimented by understanding. Not all children will be able to progress

through discovery learning alone and will depend as they have done for generations on the ability of the teacher to direct, motivate, steer and inspire. We therefore need to focus on the pathways to learning for each child and the centrality of the teacher is still essential. I think we are at a very interesting juncture in that we all recognise that the teacher requires support in his / her mission to meet the needs of the learner and the nation and to deliver revised curricula. The range of supports is significant but the degree of change during my career as principal has been enormous. I am pleased to see both the Minister and the Secretary General commit to being considered with regard to further change “so that we can embed what we are doing and pace the introduction of new initiatives.”

The capacity of schools to provide education and skills is fundamental to the health of the nation. I am pleased that we have got to the stage where education and skills have equal billing. For too long there existed a dichotomy between education and skills. I commend the tradition and practice in Community & Comprehensive schools to provide an inclusive, pluralist education that meets the needs of all pupils from the community, respecting the founding spirit of the school's patrons.

As a model, the Community & Comprehensive school has given much to the state. It has provided a *case study* for how the aspirations of the state to deliver a broad, comprehensive, co-educational, multi-denominational, multi-cultural and inclusive education can be met. That is not to say that the Community and Comprehensive Sector is the only school type committed to such a vision and we commend all schools that share this vision. There are three very strong brands in secondary education and it is healthy for the state and for education that each of them is supported to continue to develop to evolve both uniquely but also to continue to explore areas of shared purpose.

ACCS is committed to supporting the Community & Comprehensive Sector continue to realise this vision into the future and to this end records appreciation to the efforts of the AJP – the Association of Joint Patrons of Community & Comprehensive Schools – to examine how our Sector will evolve in the coming years. We note the Secretary General's acknowledgement in the 2019 Action Plan that “the educational and training sector is all the richer for having such a diversity of voices.” We in ACCS continue to argue for the community school as a model with capacity for diversity and plurality to be made available as an informed choice for parents and believe that this patronage model should be recognised under diversity, plurality and parental choice.

I would like to record my own appreciation to former CEs of Donegal VEC, now Donegal ETB – Seán O'Longain, Shaun Purcell and current CE Anne McHugh for the calibre of nominees they have sent to serve on the Board of Management of Carndonagh Community School. Similarly I equally wish to thank the Bishops of Derry, Bishop Daly, Bishop Hegarty and currently Bishop McKeown for the calibre of their nominees and the service they have given to our school and our community. The access to FSSU support, the revision of the Governance manual and our own ACCS targeted support will continue to strengthen governance functions in our schools.

I read an article back in the Autumn – an unattributed article – around the apparent difficulty in getting people competent enough to serve on Boards such are the challenges facing Boards. I was surprised by this as personally I have never had any issue with having competent people come forward to serve on the Board. It made me wonder what areas of competence were required or lacking? I would agree that serving on a Board is challenging and one of the great strengths of ACCS is the individual training and targeted support they provide for Boards of Management. Indeed we have a further governance section on Thursday. The ACCS support provided to our schools on all matters is exceptional both in its practical nature but also in its timeliness.

Going back to serving on the Board. A Board of Management is one of the illustrations of local democracy at work – people representing the community, people who have an affinity, a commitment and a passion for the school. The autonomy of a Community/Comprehensive School Board of Management to set the direction and priorities for the school is very important and we should be wary of interfering with that dynamic. Over the years each school board will meet a challenge that would be hard to foresee and for which there will be specialist knowledge/ advice required. All organisations experience exceptional incidents. However mostly it is the capacity to respond to the local needs with an understanding of the local dynamics that are the really valuable competences for Board members. I would caution against constituting Boards as a panel of experts and commend the current ACCS practice of resourcing, training and supporting Boards individually and collectively to empower them to serve both the needs of their local communities and the demands of good corporate governance. I acknowledge the support from the DES for ACCS to support our schools, most recently in the area of GDPR and believe this represents cost-effective and highly efficient support for schools.

This is not my first Convention, but it is my first address as President. In preparing I thought it would be interesting to examine what some of my predecessors focussed on in their address. Like all historical analysis it was significant in how some things have changed while others have not. It is most illuminating in what the Presidents asked for or highlighted as priorities. In 2007 and again in 2008 the President implored that “the present system of releasing teachers for inservice during the school year be replaced as a matter of urgency, little or no progress has been made in this regard.” We have to acknowledge that the Cluster model used by JCT has helped but the complications around Leaving Cert. Oral exams and practicals remain.

The President went on to mention with regard to catering adequately for Special Needs Students – “I cannot comprehend how this can happen unless a specifically designated post is created in each school together with administrative assistance....”. In 2018 Antoinette Nic Gearailt again reiterated “that schools need someone to co-ordinate and manage SEN provision to deliver the expectations in CL 14/2017”.

But to be fair in 2007 the President also pointed to the need for investment in Leadership Development and in this area the DES has delivered with the creation of the CSL, the funding of leadership development programmes across the Education Centres, JCT Leadership workshops promoting teaching and learning and most fundamentally in the reinvestment in the middle management structures through CL 03/18, the guidelines offered to schools on what constitutes exemplary practice through LAOS and the investment in additional Deputy Principal positions for schools.

In 2007 the President also referred to the need for time for planning – professional time. Again that has been delivered at considerable expense and in preference to other scarce choices. School Management need the operation of this professional time to be clarified to ensure that it represents a return on investment as there remain current anomalies around timetabling and teaching time. For those of us who manage daily in the context of scarce resources having to make strategic choices, we acknowledge that the Department also operates within these constraints but note that the most effective and meaningful determination of priorities comes from the engagement with the school management bodies.

There are 96 Community & Comprehensive schools. It has been my pleasure to visit a number of them to date. We know that all of our schools are unique, due very much to their geography and the communities they represent. At a recent social gathering the Minister referred to the significance of Geography. He mentioned how important it is to bring success to the regions, to have employment, to have facilities for communities. He understands what it is to be on the periphery in this country – the time lapse between Dublin and the regions. I am always amused at the comments by people on their first visit to Donegal and I mean the real Donegal – the far North – when they tell me of the awful distance from Dublin to Donegal (170 Miles). They don't seem to appreciate that it is actually also 170 miles from Donegal to Dublin. More significant than the time lapse is the infrastructural lapse and the economic lapse. How many of you wave goodbye to the Leaving Cert. class each year knowing they will enrich all communities except the communities that formed and molded them? If we were to use the analogy of the country as a boat, it would have capsized years ago such is the proliferation of the greater Dublin area. There is hope though for the regions and the investment by Pharma and ICT companies in the North West represents a beacon for our communities. I applaud the imaginative engagement and support offered to our schools by several of these companies in the form of training, staff development, work and skills experience and scholarships and I mention two in particular – OPTUM and PRAMERICA. I also believe that the creation of the Technological Universities if strategically situated will do much to support the reinvigoration of the regions.

I take this opportunity to again refer to Geography – this time as having an adverse impact on our pupils from the periphery who succeed in gaining entry onto third level programmes. It can be unsustainable for many of them due to difficulties around accommodation and living expenses placing heavy burdens on families.

Success in our schools is always relative. Everyone of us has experienced the satisfaction of having a pupil score 600 points because it gets the headlines and is a reward for academic rigor. However equally satisfying is having the first child in 3 generations of a family sit his / her Leaving Cert. or the first child in a family to go to college. That is the liberating force of education, the great social leveler, the breaker of cycles. That is the business we are in! I am pleased to see that commitment endorsed by the DES in the recent Action Plan at Action no. 16.2.

“Develop a new resource allocation model for application to all School Support Programme schools to include a more tailored system of resource allocation, within which there are more grades of disadvantage identified and resources allocated accordingly in response to the needs of individual schools.”

Teacher Supply

Perhaps now it is ironic that it is in the greater Dublin area that the impact of teacher supply is being most severely felt. The difficulties in relation to teacher supply have been highlighted at this convention and in many other fora. For schools the shortage of teachers remains among the most worrying and frustrating issues that must be managed week in, week out. Despite extreme efforts made by Principals and Boards, far too often schools fail to get even an applicant for vacant positions. And this remains the situation for all types of vacancies ranging from RPT to short-term substitution.

ACCS welcomes the establishment of the Teacher Supply Working Group and the announcement of the Action Plan to address the issue. The complexity of the problem is also understood. Undoubtedly the proposed interventions will have a positive impact on the problem of teacher shortages. But most of these interventions will only improve the situation in the medium to long-term. Schools urgently need short-term measures to ensure that classes are taught by a teacher, not left unattended or supervised by an out of field teacher or a non-teacher. We are

asking that urgent consideration be given to concrete interventions that will make a difference on the ground in schools. There is frustration at the amount of time spent by school management on recruitment which proves fruitless.

Special Education

The % of the education budget assigned to special education is worthy of mention and the ongoing efforts to support inclusion is admirable. We, in the Community & Comprehensive Sector, have been part of this agenda and with regard to the Admissions Bill I believe our schools are well positioned in terms of compliance, essentially because we have been inclusive – accepting every child. I would have more anticipation for the “Exit Bill” – namely in how we ensure equality of access post Leaving Cert. We know that social and economic factors influence outcomes. Perhaps we need to realign the scale to reflect the real value or reflection of pupils ability or attainment by asking what 500 points in a DEIS school represents. We acknowledge the supports offered through, HEAR, DARE and ACCESS and the engagement of third level colleges in access programmes is to be welcomed and applauded.

New Model

For the last two years, schools have worked with a special education allocation based on a school profile model as proposed in the policy document ‘Delivery for Students with SEN – a better and more equitable way’. The certainty around the allocation has certainly allowed schools to plan more effectively. However, the capacity to put effective supports in place depends on the profile of a school being truly reflective of that school’s needs. It was expected that the recent re-profiling of schools and the ensuing allocations would differentiate substantially to reflect the needs of wholly inclusive schools. We must ensure that the measures used to profile schools have the capacity to accurately identify the real needs of each school. Some of our schools, inclusive of large numbers of students with special educational needs did not have an increase in their allocations. A number of these same schools also have the support of a Behaviour for Learning teacher and the retention of this support is essential to realistically support students in a meaningful way. A number of these same schools are anxious that they may lose their NBSS support teacher. These schools could in effect see a reduction in the supports they can offer students. We must ensure that these schools have an allocation that allows them to put in place the ‘right supports’ for the right students, at the ‘right time’ as envisaged in the new model.

The Minister and his officials will have the figures and statistics available as to how the Education budget has grown since the early years of the state and indeed it has – €10.7billion. We welcome the partial restoration of capitation though there is still a long way to go. However it would be remiss of me if I didn’t acknowledge the efforts by schools across all sectors to try and keep afloat in times of severe financial constraints. This period also happened to be contemporaneous with some of the most significant reforms at Junior Cycle and an increase in legislative compliance when **‘the times certainly were a changin’**. School managements had to address data management obligations Ppod and GDPR, Procurement, RCT, FSSU, Child Safeguarding and Garda Vetting. Our engagement with state agencies TUSLA, HSE, CAMHS, EWO has multiplied, reflecting the breadth of supports schools offer and are expected to offer their pupils.

Our schools have incorporated curricular reform and the governance and legislative compliance obligations while experiencing financial and personnel constraints.

We now have many of our schools experiencing a double jeopardy caused by the Moratorium on clerical and caretaking appointments. Because clerical functions and caretaking tasks must be discharged to sustain the operation of the school, these roles have been funded from the general school budget, a budget which is already inadequate and which itself suffered an 11% cut. This means that funds which should be invested elsewhere are being diverted to cover essential clerical and caretaking needs. The loss of funding has been dramatic for many of our schools.

Goal 5 Action No.74 in the 2019 Action Plan commits to

“Support the operation of a high-quality school system through the annual provision of teaching and financial supports. . .”

Goal 3 of the previous Action Plan for Education stresses the need to provide

“ongoing practical support to the key people in the education sector is vital if we are to realise the ambitious objectives that we have for Irish education”.

Secretary General, we know you are conscious of these deficits and impediments and we here restate that Organisational Goal No. 1 for ACCS is the ending of the moratorium and the funding of appropriate clerical / administrative and caretaking support for schools which will allow school leaders to meet their true mission as leaders of teaching and learning. We are asking that this be addressed as an immediate priority.

The nation expects a lot from the 21st Century teacher and I am pleased to say in the vast majority of cases the 21st Century teacher and school delivers.

If we have increased the expectations on our teachers then we must acknowledge that the state has and is investing in the training and continuous professional development of teachers. The evolution of educational and psychological research has transformed the knowledge base for the formation of teachers. The combined work of the teacher training colleges, Teaching Council, PDST, SESS, NCSE, JCT, NCCA must surely be producing a better prepared and better-informed teacher than when I graduated.

If we are producing a better prepared, trained, more responsive, flexible teacher then there is a serious question as to how they can be paid differently. Combined with the teacher supply issue the morale of our young teachers must be of concern. Why are so many of our graduates working abroad? How can we attract them back to resolve our teacher supply crisis? The forum on teacher supply has identified areas that may offer partial solutions – such as teacher sharing by schools. However there appears to be really only longer term solutions for what is a current crisis. The realistic solution remains in providing the capacity for our young teachers to earn a living. The collateral damage to schools, communities and families has yet to be measured. If a teacher cannot afford to live somewhere adjacent to where he / she works there is a loss of social capital to the school and the community in terms of school and extra-curricular / community engagement. The damage to the family dynamic if the commute to work is 2+ hours to and 2+ hours home must surely be of concern. It is often the younger teachers who take up the baton providing additional opportunities for our pupils. There has never been a cost benefit analysis of the extra-curricular contribution of our teachers.

In 2007 at our annual School Leavers Service, I referred to that year's cohort as being probably the first generation who could expect to gain employment in their chosen field without leaving their own country. Little did we know the catastrophe of almost biblical proportions that was to befall that very generation – the generation who would find it hardest to survive in their own country - to find work, to find homes. Where does this sit with our expectations of wellbeing for everyone?

If we are expecting great things from our young teachers where does that place the rest of us – the generation who has encountered and assimilated such rapid change during the past 20 years. I am a great believer in the theory of unexpected consequences. I was more than pleasantly surprised when I came across my H.Dip. Examination papers of 1979 and noted some of the questions;

Q.2 on School & Curriculum:

“While social class is of dubious relationship to ability and attainment within a class of children, the way those children are perceived by their teachers certainly is not.” Discuss with reference to research on teacher attitude and pupils attainment.

Q.5 “Curriculum evaluation and in particular assessment of pupil development is a more complex process than our present Intermediate and Leaving Certificate would lead us to believe”. Discuss by showing the scope of curriculum evaluation.

Q.8. “It is not desirable to construct a curriculum for general education directly on the basis of separate subjects; there are many aspects of life where propositional truths contained in subjects have little direct relevance to the needs and future requirements of pupils”. Discuss.

I would dearly love to have the answers I wrote to those questions. It would appear that we have been on the journey for longer than we thought.

A lot of lives are determined by luck, by happy accidents or the opposite, which takes me back to the H.Dip. exam question – the relationship between social class, attainment, teacher perception. I think that we in the Community & Comprehensive Sector have moved beyond that historical perception – and that much of this has been built upon the inclusive nature and characteristic spirit of each of our schools. It has also been supported by DEIS and School Completion Programme which has been hugely important scaffolds provided by the Department of Education & Skills and I give credit to the Department for this. We are awaiting the review of DEIS. However, despite DEIS there still remains deficits for not only our Urban DEIS schools but for the Urban DEIS across all Sectors and we would ask that special consideration is given to the Urban DEIS schools in terms of additional Deputy Principal and/or concessionary AP 1s and that this would not be capped by size.

Over my career as Principal, I have had to deal with a very significant number of people across all sections of the Department – not just Allocations and Payroll. (One remaining anomaly - I still haven't been able to accept that an emergency is only an emergency after the event!). It is unlikely that I will get the chance to thank them individually so I will take this opportunity to record my thanks for their courtesy, assistance, patience and advice. I regret that very often just after I had built up a very good working relationship they were shipped off to another section – hopefully due to promotion.

I willingly accepted the role of President, in the full understanding, like the Minister that geography is an ever-present. Part of my motivation in undertaking the role was to ensure that the people from the faraway hills can make a contribution - but equally significantly it was in the determination also to pay back in a small way what ACCS has done for me over my career. I spoke of happy accidents earlier - belonging to the Community & Comprehensive Sector, supported by ACCS – having been supported in turn by General Secretaries - Seán McCann, Ciarán Flynn, Eileen Salmon - all of them exceptional - was more than a happy accident.

It is a privilege as President, to work with such a professional and committed team, the officials and the secretariat and the enthusiasm of the Executive for all matters education is truly inspiring. There is a true sense of team.

That sense of team is reflected in the work of our committees which strive to meet the developing needs of our schools and for their championing and sharing of innovative and creative practice in our schools. I mention just a few. . .

The ICT Sub-Committee for their work in supporting our schools on the Digital Strategy and recently on the work on Social Media Policy.

One of the highlights this year at the In-School Management Conference was the presentation at our In School Management Conference by Kati Tiainen on the developments in ICT; It was almost Orwellian in the extent to which one could be connected and contactable to everyone and everything through not just the obvious ICT tools – phone, ipad etc. – but also mirrors, windows etc. It gave us a glimpse into how ICT is evolving but it may also have stimulated us to realise how we need regularly to disconnect from ICT.

To regain my equilibrium I took leave early one Monday morning about 6 weeks ago to attend a seminar in the Ulster University, Magee Campus Derry, by Heather McGowan who describes herself as a Future of Work Strategist – working with some of the biggest employers in the world – imagining where the jobs of the future will be. We know that many of the current jobs will be done by robots - because the Taoiseach told us quite recently. In fact Friedman puts it bluntly “Anything mentally routine or predictable can soon be done by an algorithm”. In the past we learned in order to work. Henceforth we must continually work to learn to continuously adapt. It is not all about technology skills. The future of work is continuously adapting. This could sound terrifying but adapting is what we have been successful at as a species. My experience of working with succeeding generations of Irish adolescents inclines me to trust in their capacity to adapt and to succeed. Indeed the work on Student Voice is proving to be empowering and valuable. And again our schools must get credit for promoting an informed and articulate population. I salute the many pupils who registered their concern recently on behalf of Climate Change. The future or what is left of it belongs to them and they deserve our support.

I wish to thank the Education Committee for their work in transposing theory into practice again highlighting and sharing areas of excellent practice in our Sector.

The Middle Leaders Committee deserves special mention as it is doing really innovative work on supporting our middle leaders to embed SSE and LAOS. The response from our schools to this pilot programme required us to extend the participation to a second cohort of schools and this in itself reflects the commitment within our schools to innovative methodologies and to the drive to enable high quality teaching and learning. Particular credit must go to our Assistant General Secretary, Áine O’Sullivan for her leadership in this area and in area of Student Voice.

Áine also manages our quality control evaluations of all in-service and this represents our commitment to constantly reviewing what we are doing for our schools.

Human Resource Management is a vital function for schools and we are fortunate in the competent and dedicated service of Anne Marie Dillon.

The Convention Handbook alone is testament to the work of Susan, Debbie, Eileen and Fiona but the organization of Convention and their year round service is exceptional and we thank them for this. We welcome Hilary Treacy onto the ACCS team to her first Convention.

Any team has to be led and we are indeed fortunate in our General Secretary, John Irwin whose vision, energy, enthusiasm and 360-degree competence makes it a pleasure for myself and the Executive.

I look forward to the coming year, working with the Head office team in the best interests of our sector and our schools. I wish you a very enjoyable and interesting Convention.

Go dtiocfaidh muid! Go raibh maith agat.

*Mr. Paul Fiorentini,
President, ACCS*