

Presidential Address to the Annual Convention of Community and Comprehensive Schools, held in Killarney, Co. Kerry by Mr. Paul Fiorentini, Uachtarán, Cumann na Scoileanna Pobail agus Cuimsitheacha.

Friday, 6th March 2020.

Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh gach duine agaibh chuig Chomhdáil Bhliantuil de Chumann na Scoileanna pobail agus Chuimsitheacha. Tá muid in am aisteach – gan rialtas. Nil an aire measc ach cuirimid fáilte specialta roimh an Rúnaí Ginearálta agus roimh Oifigi na Roinne atá anseo inniu agus roimh ar 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 Killarney for the 38th Annual Convention of the Community & Comprehensive schools. Our Theme – ‘Promoting Quality in Education’– reflects the philosophy of ACCS in how we encourage and support our schools in meeting the needs of all our pupils.

We are in strange times – without a government and without a minister present. I extend a warm ACCS welcome to the Secretary General and the officials from your Department and thank them for their continued engagement with us and the work they do to support our work. I am delighted to welcome our guests and friends from the partners and hope that you do enjoy the conference.

This year is a Convention first for two of our staff – Elaine Mooney who has joined us to manage Garda Vetting requirements and Catherine O’Sullivan who has really energized our Further Education provision. ACCS recognizes the support of the Department for these positions and to date they are representing a significant return on investment.

Strange times we may be in, but the daily challenges remain for all our schools. The word ‘change’ has probably been the most overused word in the past six weeks. Everyone is either looking for or demanding change! Change however is a word that we in the education sector understand is easier to talk about than to manage. Nevertheless, the education sector has managed enormous change in the past 20 years and some of this change has been accomplished during times of significant shortages in funding and personnel.

ACCS acknowledges the progress in terms of the alleviation with regard to Clerical and Caretaking positions in our schools and the partial restoration of budget funding. We would welcome the full restoration of funding and the appropriate schedule of ancillary staff in our schools. We know that this priority is taken seriously by the Secretary General and that often progress is constrained by myriad of competing demands on public finances.

I wish to acknowledge the support of the FSSU to our schools and our schools are pleased with the accounts package and the ease with which we can generate Reports. There remains however a fundamental issue with preparing the budget in that the budget funding is inadequate and this inevitably compromises cleaning, heating and maintenance of schools.

It is to the credit of our schools that we have managed so much change but as I commented last year – further change has to be in the context of “*enabling us embed what we are doing and pace the introduction of new initiatives.*”

One of the most interesting developments this year for us in ACCS has been the invitation to our schools to share what they are doing in terms of projects, initiatives and successes and the Newsletter demonstrates superbly how vibrant our schools are. We have come to expect our schools to be innovative, but the range of initiatives is truly impressive and it is a good model of collaboration for our schools to share the good practice.

Currently we have almost completed the initial introduction of the reform of the Junior Cycle and have begun to look at Senior Cycle and the new Leaving Cert. Subjects have been well received.

2019 saw our schools tasked with becoming GDPR compliant. This was a challenge and particularly for many schools lacking in clerical officers. I wish to commend Hillary Tracy on her efforts and thank the Department for recognising the need to support ACCS in assisting our schools. I can only wonder at the amount of material that must have been shredded nationally.

I had the chance recently to look through the Irish Public Sector Magazine. There is a fascinating article on PARTNERSHIP in the EU context which caught my attention. The central message is that nobody ever gets absolutely what they want because partnership is about compromise.

I suppose the reason it caught my attention is that partnership is very much in the fabric of ACCS. The relationships we have with all bodies and agencies is very much

structured in a partnership mindset. Whether it is in discussions with The Department, Trustees, Management Bodies, Unions, Parents, Support Agencies, we believe that respectful engagement for the best outcomes for our schools and pupils is the way forward. ACCS acknowledges the assistance it receives from all of the partners.

ACCS will continue to promote the Community School as a model which should be available to parents, representing as it does diversity, pluralism and parental choice and in the words of the Deed of Trust “providing a comprehensive system of post-primary education open to all the children of the community combining instruction in academic and practical subjects...” Interestingly it is in the Deed of Trust that we get one of the earliest references to wellbeing as the Community School was charged with contributing to “the spiritual, moral, mental and physical well-being and development of the said Community.”

Returning to the theme of the conference – Promoting Quality in Education – If we expect ongoing quality standards in education and governance then appropriate support is essential for the people working in our schools – this encompasses the training of our clerical officers, our caretakers, the upskilling of our teachers and SNAs and the provision of leadership training for our middle and senior management.

For our management teams and our teachers LAOS and CL 03/2018 have been important in identifying the standards for both management and learning and teaching. ACCS invests heavily in supporting our schools on governance, management and leading learning and teaching.

This year ACCS demonstrated highly effectively how the Middle Management of our schools can be supported to deliver LAOS and lead change in our schools. I applaud the work of our Assistant General Secretary Áine O’Sullivan and her team for this exceptional project, endorsed and approved by CSL and now commencing the third cohort of schools.

Schools and teachers wish to operate to high standards. There is no doubt that schools and their teachers are availing of a myriad of supports to enable them to become more effective and more accountable in all aspects of professional practice.

The CPD required to introduce the Junior Cycle Framework has been huge and whereas the CPD has been necessary, it is timely to reflect on the effectiveness of this model before we fully launch reform of the Senior Cycle.

If there is one positive emerging from Junior Cycle, it is the embedding of the concept of teacher collaboration. In reality it is hard to see how either the introduction of the Framework or the sanity of all could have survived without teachers discussing and sharing practice. The rewards accruing from this have also been fertilised by the percolation of teacher conversations originating through Droichead which has rightly formalised and normalised the discussion and sharing of good practice. Similarly, teacher observation has become a valued tool for the professional teacher. I am pleased to see that the Teaching Council is placing such emphasis on Continued Professional Growth for Enhanced Professional Practice.

I was really pleased that both the Chief Inspector and Mel Ainscow endorsed the practice of teacher collaboration and peer observation.

A second positive has to be the realisation that while teachers have always wanted their pupils to learn, the nature of the learning has changed from being fact based to positive learning experiences where they are able to apply their learning. This has not all been easy, nor is it yet complete.

The Harvard Business School carried out research recently which involved interviews with the top 300 CEOs in the US regarding their views on the key skill sets for their success. All 300 CEOs reported their key skills as being the non-formal skills they acquired through activities such as sport or as a result of a mentor taking a particular interest in them. These crucial life skills included critical thinking, communication, problem solving, resilience and planning.

Sean Campbell, CEO of Foroige (a former teacher) identifies the skills of the future as “the 5 Cs – critical thinking & problem solving; communication; collaboration; creativity and innovation and connecting and contributing to society.”

The match up with Junior Cycle Key Skills is quite remarkable and should encourage us to continue on the journey but also to invest in the soft projects, to support Transition Year, to encourage the One Good Adult project and peer mentoring, to extend the opportunities for volunteering that so many schools in all sectors offer.

This is not easy in a congested curriculum and again I wish to acknowledge the added value that so many of our teachers bring beyond the classroom.

Professional Time was and is an acknowledgement of the ongoing professional development needs of teachers. Last year ACCS called for the operation of professional time to be clarified to ensure it represents a return on investment, is manageable and maximizes the value to teaching and learning.

School leaders understand the dynamic structure of the school day and week and appreciate how difficult it is to always formalise structured meeting time. School leaders are also keenly aware of the added value that many teachers bring to their schools whether it is in extra-curricular or pastoral care.

Time will tell if schools are able to manage the complexity of the SLARs and any damage done to the fundamentals of teacher collaboration or unraveling of Professional time would be a retrograde step.

There is a need to reflect on how to make CPD sustainable both for teachers and for school management.

For school management, it has often been difficult and on occasions traumatic trying to manage teacher absence for In-service, particularly in the context of teacher supply and the lack of qualified substitutes. Add to this the number of teachers who conduct Oral Exams, LCA Tasks, Practical subject assessments etc. Would it be simpler to buy 5 days for CPD? Certainly the State Exams Commission appear to be at crisis stage in attracting examiners and there needs to be some blue sky thinking around encouraging practising teachers to engage in correcting the state exams if we are to assure the integrity of the state exams.

We do acknowledge the work done on teacher supply, including our own efforts with Turas Abhaile. We accept that a short-term solution is unlikely. Significantly some of

the greatest issues around teacher supply are in the Dublin area. I again reiterate the point I made last year regarding the disproportionate scale of the greater Dublin area and the difficulties facing teachers seeking to live there. We have to record the loss of social capital to a school and community if the teacher is commuting 2 – 4 hours per day and the impact this has on the life of the family.

Minister McHugh placed great store on having History as a subject available to all pupils. Perhaps one lesson we should have learned from History is the value Irish people place on having their own home. It is the Irish dream forged from the memories of when we were a subject people. It is very difficult for many people to understand how people paying rent equivalent to a mortgage payment cannot get a mortgage!

It would be interesting to have an analysis of the voting pattern of young teachers in the 21 – 35 age bracket.

We should not ignore the breadth of the education system from Early Years through to Third Level and the complexities of funding and managing such a system. Neither can we ignore the different wings of the education support system whether it be NCCA, PDST, NBSS, NCSE, JCT, The Inspectorate, The Teaching Council, FSSU, C.S.L., etc. etc.

The frantic and hectic dynamic of school life sometimes causes us to forget how complex the entire education system is and for those not involved or familiar with the school dynamic it is easy to wonder what on earth could Boards, principals and teachers have to complain about.

But schools are complex environments and we have come to understand how complicated the lives of some children are.

As the functions of the school have expanded so also are there increased expectations of The School

Our schools are charged with providing the moral, physical, social, emotional, academic and spiritual needs of the child. A tricky business to be in! The expectations on schools seem to expand exponentially. Just recently we had a statement that schools should be teaching road safety modules. Obviously, nobody checked to see

how many schools are already well along that route. I wish to commend the work that our own Donegal County Council and other local authorities are doing with schools around road safety. When the health of the next generation is at stake, it is to the schools that we look. The availability of our facilities for the HSE as in the case of the HPV Vaccination programme is an illustration of how schools take on additional social responsibilities.

The current pressure on schools regarding Covid 19 is likely to be amplified in the event that further cases are identified in Ireland and it has system wide implications particularly in the event of school closures. This problem while extremely serious has also exposed the irrational excesses of social media. School leaders are accustomed to making decisions and will continue to make decisions on foot of the best advice available.

Schools are well used to having responsibility placed on them. Schools had been given the Green Flag project to drive the eco agenda but in fact saving the planet appears to have now been handed directly over to the children to manage as the adults have made such a hames of it. There is virtually no end to what schools are expected to do and the amount of industries that have grown up promoting services to schools is reflected in the endless emails that have to be filtered each day. But on balance that may equally reflect the number of entrepreneurs we have created!

We all now understand the importance of wellbeing – including our own. We congratulate our colleagues in NAPD for the work they are doing around the infinite role of the principal. We recognize both emotional and physical wellbeing. Our schools promote healthy eating and healthy lifestyles. The variety of sports and extra-curricular opportunities available in our schools beyond the classroom is admirable.

The teacher job definition has indeed changed. No longer just responsible for the grades, our teachers must be able to identify pupils who are not managing for one reason or another. We will soon be ratcheting up the barometer for exam pressure. My colleague principals confirm that despite wellbeing initiatives and strategies to build resilience we are seeing significant numbers of pupils with emotional needs and anxieties often resulting in self-harm. We have the double-edged sword of ICT which gives us so much access to learning but causes so much mayhem and pain by unregulated social media activities. Schools never get back the hours, days and weeks

spent resolving social media fallout. Many pupils are scarred from their experiences. Surely it is possible to regulate the posting of online comments. No-one should be able to use a platform or post a comment without having first registered their identity confirmed by valid identification. Unregulated access to online sites and online activity – being permanently plugged in - is counterproductive to wellbeing.

Becoming an increasing challenge for school management is dealing with suspected substance use by pupils. Principals and boards will be justifiably cautious in these circumstances.

I commend the work of school management and school personnel in all schools across all sectors who are committing significant time every day to supporting pupils through their pastoral care programmes and through just being decent and by modelling decent behaviour. Much of this will be outside the 400 Wellbeing hours.

So what is ahead of us in 2020?

Student Voice: Community and Comprehensive schools have played a significant role this year in promoting Student Voice. ACCS has supported this with the Student Voice project in conjunction with the NCCA and our schools can be proud of their student centred ethos. Our students are telling us what they want and expect not just in terms of teaching and learning. Some of our own surveys confirm the importance of social space in schools where pupils can engage with one another. This may also be important if we want them to discover the ancient art of conversation. Social space should not be reduced to hanging around corners and if we do not invest in civic and social space then we should not be surprised that less benign forces will move in to distract our young people. We can learn from the new workplace ergonomics and anyone who has been to Google, Microsoft or Facebook can see that we have to be preparing our students to be flexible, adaptable and capable of teamwork.

Parent and Student Charter: It remains to be seen how this will impact on schools and what further obligations will be placed on school management. It hopefully will clearly outline the responsibilities and obligations parents and students have to schools and that the privilege of - as well as the entitlement to education, is a tremendous investment by the state.

Obviously, the Admissions Act: For most of our Community & Comprehensive schools the Admissions Act has not posed a huge problem as we have a tradition of inclusion, with no hard or soft barriers. Where it has perhaps been interesting has been in defining the founding or characteristic spirit of the school. Our schools have been offering a comprehensive, co-educational, multi-denominational education for all the children of the community. Our schools reflect the spirit of partnership and ACCS commends the work of the Association of Joint Patrons, which has its first convention on 31st March 2020. We appreciate the work of the Department in generating supporting documentation around the Admissions process.

Pupil wellbeing is fundamental to successful engagement at school. Mel Ainscow focussed on EQUITY which he described as inclusion plus fairness. He urged us to identify the barriers to inclusion by exploring the context.

We know that social and economic disadvantage have a negative impact on pupil wellbeing and educational outcomes. It is for this reason that ACCS continues to press for additional resources for those DEIS schools which cater for a range of more complex needs than other schools. ACCS identifies as one among these supports as an additional post of responsibility at AP1 level in schools under 400 pupils, with an enhanced time allocation equivalent to the post of Deputy Principal in schools of 400 pupils. ACCS recognizes that Urban DEIS schools in areas of high disadvantage are very often the only exemplars of predictability and regularity that some pupils experience. They deserve exceptional support and ACCS supports the commitment by the Department to provide the best and most effective way of managing disadvantage which also reflects what Mel Ainscow urged “ finding better ways of reaching the most difficult children.”

School supports are not always around disadvantage. Schools and particularly large schools will have many pupils with significant and complex health problems - and schools will be expected to manage the duty of care. In a school of 1000+ pupils how many would expect a profile of 123 with Asthma – mild to severe; 4 with Diabetes; 7 with Epilepsy; 35 with allergies mild to severe; 4 in wheelchair; 45 with general medical conditions;

A 1000 pupil school is equivalent to a village.

Because C & C schools have open enrolments and practice inclusion, they will be managing a significant cohort with special educational needs. ACCS welcomed the school educational profile in CL 0014/2017 for the New Model for allocating teaching resources to meet the needs of pupils with special / additional educational needs. ACCS opposed the recommendation to take a ' minimum ' quantum of time from the teacher allocation for co-ordination and proposed that a dedicated Special Educational Needs / Inclusion Co-ordinator post be allocated to schools and that the quantum of time for co-ordination should be aligned to the educational profile of the school. This ACCS proposal has now acquired added urgency in the light of the Proposed New Model for Allocating Special Needs Assistants to Mainstream Schools. ACCS supports the review of the SNA allocation model and will contribute to the discussions on how this valuable support can be best applied for the needs of our pupils.

This is a specialist role and it is unfair that principals should be expected to implement it.

Children who have experienced traumas in their lives will display different needs and emotional needs are often hardest to identify and manage. Schools need access to specialist supports – including speech and language, psychological services, etc. - if they are to meet these needs.

Special Needs provision is a significant part of our schools. It is a very significant cost to the exchequer. To respect the profile and maximise outcomes it needs to be managed by a dedicated, committed, qualified SEN / Inclusion Co-ordinator who can build and lead a team to manage, properly structured programmes, engage with parents and evaluate the outcomes for pupils.

The European Education Policy Network proposed in 2019 that across the European dimension we should be:

“providing the tools and training to teachers and school leaders which are necessary for supporting students with special needs.”

This is not a situation where it will be possible to retrofit school leaders.

This year has been a huge learning experience for me. Obviously, I have again come to appreciate the professionalism of our Head Office team, whose energy and enthusiasm is inspiring – our General Secretary –John Irwin, Assistant General Secretary Áine O’Sullivan, H.R. Manager Ann Marie Dillon. The indomitable Susan, Debbie and Eileen for whom no task or request is too much; To the new recruits who have fitted in seamlessly – Hillary Tracy our GDPR advisor; Catherine O’Sullivan our Further Ed. Advisor and Elaine Mooney Vetting Administrator.

I made a reference earlier to the concept of volunteering: ACCS could not function without the dedicated and committed contributions of the troops who serve on Executive; on all our Committees including Education, In-School Management ICT etc. and to all the current principals, deputies, past-presidents, former principals, former general secretaries who contribute to our support projects. They all contribute to the sense of the ACCS team and even ACCS family.

I have also had the pleasure of meeting many people from the partners with a similar commitment to creating the best education system for our children and our society. We should be confident that with the right purpose and motivation it is a goal that is achievable.

There are great things happening in education.

The challenge for us as school leaders and all involved in education is how to pull all the great things together!

Go dtiocfaidh muid! Go raibh maith agaibh.