

Presidential Address

ACCS Convention 2018



Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
Cumann na Scoileanna Pobail agus Cuimsitheacha

Ms. Antoinette Nic Gearailt

A Chairde

Introduction

Ba mhaith liom fáilte chroíúil a chur roimh gach duine agaibh chuig Chomhdháil Bhliantúil Chumann na Scoileanna Pobail agus Chuimsitheacha. Táimid fíor-bhuíoch go bhfuil an tAire Oideachais agus Scileanna, Richard Bruton TD agus Oifigí eile na Roinne in ann bheith linn i mbliana. Tá súil agam gur bhain gach duine agaibh tairbhne agus taitneamh as na laethanta I nGaillimh, Cathair na Treibhe.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to each of you to the annual Convention of ACCS. We are delighted to welcome Minister of Education and Skills, Mr Richard Bruton TD to Convention again this year and we are delighted that he and his Officials from the DES can be with us. I hope that everyone has found convention both beneficial and enjoyable here in the City of the Tribes.

This year's theme for Convention is 'Leadership - Making a Difference'.

Speaking to this gathering about leadership and leading education is a bit like trying to bring 'coals to Newcastle' but research would say that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.

As leaders of community and comprehensive schools we have a deep-rooted philosophy; that is to lead schools that represent our communities in their entirety; to respond to the needs of those communities; to ensure that the education we provide gives the best possible opportunities to all students in those communities. Our schools are as diverse

as the communities they serve. In response to that diversity the comprehensive curriculum combines both academic and vocational excellence to provide a curriculum that is modern, innovative and responsive to the most up to date educational needs of young people.

That curriculum must address knowledge, emotional and physical needs if we are to help students be all they can be. We want them to leave our schools as mature and rounded young people; confident in who they are; with the academic and moral preparation for responsible living and meaningful work.

We are also schools that reach beyond the gate, providing educational opportunities through adult education, further education or by making the facilities of the school available to communities. Ours are schools in the communities and those communities are very much in the schools.

We acknowledge the introduction of measures that will positively support schools in making a difference.

Thirty-five of our schools now have either one or two additional Deputy Principals. Schools with under 500 students also have an ex-quota allocation. These appointments recognise the complexity of school leadership and has allowed these schools to move beyond dealing only with the immediate and put in place structures that support teaching and learning and more long-term planning.

However, we continue to ask how can schools between 500 and 699 students be enabled to do the same? We need to consider the needs of these schools.

The publication of the leadership and management circular recognises the need to distribute responsibility. It will enable the development of middle management leadership teams and allow schools to identify and respond to needs that up to now could not be met. The provision for flexibility will also allow schools to re-prioritise as those needs change. It also re-creates a pathway for teachers own professional development, giving teachers opportunities for leadership within their own schools. As we begin the re-commencement of the posts, I do want to acknowledge the work that has been done by teachers in a voluntary capacity for the duration of the moratorium; without this work many students would have been left without essential supports.

The restoration of Adult Education Posts will enable schools to re-engage with provision for local community-based education.

We welcome the Minister's announcement of a further €30 million investment in ICT infrastructure. Community and Comprehensive schools are well placed to make best use of modern technology. Last year, ACCS supported the employment of an IT consultant, who assisted over two-thirds of our schools identify where they are at in terms of IT infrastructure and plot a road map to ensure that they could make best use of future investments. Schools can now move forward on that road. The further opportunity for schools to engage with the Schools Excellence Fund will be of special welcome to a number of our schools.

Leadership whether as Joint Patrons, members of Boards of Management or Principals constantly presents challenges because schools and education never stand still.

Community and Comprehensive schools occupy a distinctive space in the Irish educational landscape. The governance structure based on Joint Patrons brings together secular and religious patrons in equal partnership. That Patronage has been capably and consistently exercised by a wide range of patron bodies, bringing together the collective experience of Religious Orders, ETB, Catholic and Protestant Bishops, Educate Together and the Minister. Working together they have created innovative schools that are reflective of society today, inclusive, tolerant, respectful of all, with a common purpose to provide a two-fold education that addresses both the academic and personal development of all students.

Structures to best support the function of patronage into the future could be re-imagined.

We welcome the Minister's goal in the Action Plan 2018 to increase the choice of schools and to increase the number of multi-denominational schools. Community and comprehensive schools are well positioned to engage in the patronage of a number of these new schools. There is a richness and balance in Joint Patronage that can respond to the emerging needs of a changing society.

In relation to Religious Education, we recognise the diversity of our society and the requirement to meet the diverse needs of our students. This is and has been established

practice since the inception of the Community and Comprehensive Schools. The Deed of Trust, as far back as the 1960's recognised that students attending our schools would be of diverse faiths. The Deed upholds the rights of parents and students to withdraw from religious instruction and worship and this right has always been affirmed and supported by the Joint Patrons. The inclusion of the right to 'opt-out' of religious instruction and worship in the Deed, recognised both the rights of those of differing or no faith and equally those of Catholic faith to be accommodated in our schools. We recognise that we now work in a more pluralist society where alternative provision must be made for those who wish to 'opt-out'. We also recognise our responsibilities as leaders under Section 9(D) of the Education Act to promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students. Religion has never become an issue of conflict or division in our schools. Circular 13/18 comprehends Community Schools in relation to Religious instruction and worship. ACCS will work in consultation with our Joint Patrons on the implementation of this circular within the context of the Deed, Ethos and Characteristic spirit of our schools.

At school level there are common issues influencing leadership in all our schools.

The diversity of the curriculum we offer and the ability to have it delivered by high quality teachers is what makes the real difference to student achievement. The difficulties around teacher supply have been widely aired at previous Conventions and in the media. Without wanting to go over

old ground, the reality of how difficult it was to fill vacancies this year must be highlighted. What was different this year was that schools could not employ sufficient teachers to fill RPT contract vacancies across a wide range of subjects, from Gaeilge to Modern Languages, Sciences, Maths, Home Economics, Guidance and Resource. Vacancies had to be re-advertised and re-interviewed throughout the summer either because of insufficient applicants or because the appointed candidates withdrew from positions as they had the choice of several jobs. Schools lost teachers as they were about to re-open, leaving students without teachers at the start of the new term or resulting in major time-table changes. In an ACCS survey, completed by 70% of schools, the same narrative was repeated in almost all regions with Dublin being especially problematic. Principals went to extraordinary lengths to ensure students had teachers. But many would say that the 'piece-meal' solutions put in place are not sustainable when students are not being taught consistently by the same teachers.

For example, in one school the Physics teachers retired; the school advertised Physics/Maths twice, no applicants. The retired teacher came back to teach the 6th years and the other classes were rotated. Six weeks into the school year the school succeeded in appointing a teacher with Biology/Maths and this teacher was willing to teach Physics. Three weeks later that teacher got a job with her degree subjects and left. Again, the retired teacher agreed to come back for the 6th years and now the school has a PME student teaching for the rest of the year. The same school was without a Career Guidance teacher for 3.5 months following

maternity leave. This example could be replicated in many schools.

Coupled with the impossibility of hiring a subject specific substitute for unexpected sick leave or the wide range of approved teacher leave, it is no surprise that teacher supply is the issue highlighted by Principals as the most serious issue they are dealing with.

The Minister's decision to relax of some of the rules around hiring substitutes is welcome, as is his commitment to establish a Teacher Supply Steering Committee. There is an urgency to establish one body with oversight on the issue of teacher supply. In the short-term schools will have to be able to employ more teachers and we would ask that consideration be given to a range of options. Second year PME students are qualified and have a year's teaching experience. Could they not be contracted for a defined number of RPT hours? After all many of them are working part-time jobs to sustain themselves financially. There are retirees, qualified and with invaluable experience, who may be willing to work a reduced number of hours if financially possible to do so. There are thousands of Irish graduates working abroad, some of whom might be encouraged to return if the terms, conditions and career prospects were sufficiently attractive. The registration process for teachers from other jurisdictions might be made less laborious and costly.

In the longer term, we may now be at the juncture where we look at teacher training differently. We can no longer assume

that teacher training will automatically attract sufficient numbers post Leaving Certificate. Nor can we assume that all those who qualify will look for employment in Ireland. The reality is that we are competing in a global employment market where young graduates see very attractive employment coupled with the opportunity to travel, earn substantial money and often to pay off college debt or to have a realistic chance of securing a mortgage. Now we must win hearts and minds. At a time of almost full employment, with high-spec jobs available after a four-year degree programme in many disciplines, the length of teacher training with its associated costs, is a disincentive. If teaching is to win its share of talented young people, this needs to be re-visited. A wider range of concurrent degree programmes would help in this regard. The routes into the profession need to be expanded. What new pathways into teaching can be developed to facilitate graduates working in other careers who may wish to enter the teaching profession?

We appreciate that solutions will take time to impact in schools, but the current situation is not sustainable.

Junior Cycle Roll-Out

Junior Cycle roll-out is now underway in earnest and when fully implemented will make a significant difference to the way students learn. It is both exciting and challenging for schools and we must recognise that it is still in its infancy and schools are very much at the embedding stage. In September 2018 there are another five new subjects to be introduced for the first time. Schools are introducing new

assessment and reporting methods, structuring Wellbeing, possibly introducing short courses and PLU's, changing the way we timetable and facilitating CPD. Parents and students need to be informed and updated to understand the new approach to Junior Cycle education. The P.Pod system has yet to be fully developed to accommodate entry of results by teachers. With all this in mind we would ask that the dedicated management resource hours currently available be retained for the 2018/2019 school year. This would allow schools to build on the work that has been started with teachers who already understand what is involved. We know that ultimately this co-ordination will be incorporated into the new leadership and management framework and the flexibility in this process will allow schools to re-prioritise to include junior cycle. But to do so in 2018 is too soon.

We welcome the department's introduction of the cluster model of in-service. This had a very positive impact in schools, minimising interruption to students and negating the problem of endless substitution. The model also develops strong communities of learners, with teachers from local schools sharing best practice. In relation to SLAR's, we need to find a mechanism to schedule these meetings without constant interruption of student tuition time. An agreed structure is needed before the full roll-out of SLAR's must be accommodated.

Special Education Needs

Community and comprehensive schools have led the way and continue to do so in an unfailing commitment to inclusion. Our schools have always sought a way to include; to find

ways of adjusting the system to make the educational experience the best it can be for the student who struggles because of some special educational need

The model of allocation introduced last September has opened new opportunities for the way we work with students with SEN. It gives schools flexibility to identify students who need different levels of support at different times. The certainty around the allocation also allows school to integrate special needs education into the timetable in a more productive way.

Going forward, the model will work if a school's allocation is adequate to meet the needs of the full cohort of students who legitimately fall within the remit of special education. The reprofiling of schools and the adjustments in the weightings will be crucial in ensuring that this happens. As the allocation for complex needs changes, the weightings given to the social context, literacy and numeracy must be high enough to capture the context of the school. This is the only way to reflect the genuine differences between schools.

We welcome the Pilot Project for the introduction of Therapeutic Services to schools. For years students, with very clear needs, have not been able to access therapies, such as speech and language. The new service, if it is to be an effective educational support, must ensure that students have adequate and frequent access to make a difference. We would strongly suggest that it be established under the auspices of education as an integral part of special education.

There are very specific requirements for administration and planning set out in the guidelines. Mainstream teachers need guidance to integrate special needs education into mainstream teaching. The deployment and re-deployment of SNA's must be managed. If the aspirations and the organisational requirements set out in the guidelines are to become reality, a dedicated leader of special education is a necessity. The long-advocated SENCO position is needed and separate to, not drawn from student allocation. The SENCO model, as proposed by ACCS, would allocate co-ordination hours relative to the SEN allocation. This is the only way special education can be properly led and managed.

Apprenticeships

We welcome the goal to further expand apprenticeship and training programmes. This will provide strong alternative pathways for many students with skills crucial to economic development. However, defining the success of education only in terms of entry into university, as judged by league tables, de-values the skills and abilities of these students. As an education system and as a society we need to move away from this narrow definition of educational achievement.

Some of our schools work in contexts that require a particular range of supports if they are to make a difference.

Scoileanna Gaeltachta

Is grúpa ar leith iad na scoileanna Gaeltachta. Maraon le scoileanna eile 'sé soláthair múinteora ceann de na deacrachtaí is mó atá acu. Chuige sin fáiltímid roimh an rún

soláthar níos leithne in Oiliúint Tosaigh Múinteoirí trí mheán na Gaeilge. Ina theannta sin, b'fhéidir go féidir linn féachaint ar mhic-léinn ollscoile uile. An-chuid acu le Gaeilge árd-leibhéil san Arteist ach nach mbíonn sé de mhuintín acu cur isteach ar phost ag múineadh trí mheán na Gaeilge. Dá mbeidís in ann cúrsa roghnach, ar mhúineadh trí Gaeilge a dhéanamh, le linn na céime, seans níos fearr go gcuifidís isteach ar na postanna seo. B'fhéidir go fiú é a phlé.

Le linn coinbhinsiún an bhliain seo caite, d'fháiltíomar roimh sheoladh an Pholasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta. In imeacht na bliana tharainn cuireadh tús le cur i bhfeidhm an pholasaí. Is údar misnigh do na scoileanna laistigh den earnáil go bhfuil an tAonad Oideachais Gaeltachta bunaithe anois agus plean gníomhaíocht iarrtha ag an Aonad ar na scoileanna sin. Is céim fiúntach chun cinn atá anseo ach is deacair a bheith ag súil go mbeidh scoileanna ábalta pleanáil mar is cuí gan eolas cruinn faoin leibhéal tacaíochta a bheidh ar fáil ná léargas cheart a bheith tugtha dóibh ar na hachmhainní sin.

Tá an taighde déanta, tá na torthaí ar fáil, tá na slait tomhais soiléir agus seanaithne againn orthu. Ní tharlódh scála an ghnímh atá ag teastáil ins an ceantair is láidre Gaeltachta gan tacaíocht shuntasach do na scoileanna sin i dtosach báire. Cinnte is cóir gach seans a thabhairt do scoileanna ar mian leo aitheantas mar scoil ghaeltachta a bhaint amach. Ach i dtús báire caithfear maolú a dhéanamh ar an aistriú teanga ins na ceantair a bhfuil céadatán ard cainteoirí dúchais agus cainteoirí gníomhacha iontu go fóill. Tá tuscint ag an scoileanna agus na pobail ar an obair atá le déanamh, tá siad

sásta tabhairt faoi ach “faigheann na ba bás an fhad a bhíonn an féar ag fás”.

DEIS

Twenty-seven community and comprehensive schools are designated DEIS. We welcome the goal of the new identification process to recognise different levels of disadvantage within DEIS and to resource in respect to the needs of individual schools.

We are only two generations away from the introduction of free education when furthering your education was about getting beyond primary school. Today furthering education has gone beyond completing Leaving Cert. For the majority it's about advancing to further and higher education. But for many students in DEIS schools who are equally capable, there are huge gaps to be bridged. And these students depend on the school to bridge these gaps across a wide range of needs. Schools must be able to provide supports like enhanced tuition and guidance, manage serious literacy and numeracy deficits, provide meals for those who come hungry, study facilities, parent education programmes and also manage the consequences of broken homes and communities. That is why they need the combined resources of the DEIS grant, the enhanced teacher and guidance allocation and SCP. These are the only resources that these school will have. DEIS schools cannot look to parents to supplement what the state provides. If schools are to make a difference to the lives of these students, there has to be continued recognition of the need for this diverse range of supports. ‘In order to achieve equality, we have to treat people differently’

Further and Adult Education

A number of our schools also provide Further Education, Adult Education and Second Chance education. Our Further Education providers range from large to small; all providing education and training in response to locally identified needs. For many students it makes geographical and economic sense to allow them access further education locally without the necessity for travel or accommodation. However, the necessity for each provider to make individual application to QQI, is both expensive and administratively excessive. We acknowledge that schools in our sector, along with those in the voluntary sector are among the smaller providers, but we would strongly contend that this diversity of provision needs to be supported. Our providers need to be able to access QQI and the supports of SOLAS as a shared service. Proposals have been made through JFERG and there is an urgency to resolve the current difficulties.

Capacity of Boards of Management

The Board of Management is the authority which governs, approves and oversees all this work. We know that Boards manage schools within a growing culture of compliance, governance and educational change. And Board members understand the need to build governance capacity. So that Boards can fully meet these responsibilities, ACCS invests heavily in training and supporting Boards, training individual Boards on appointment; providing an annual programme of relevant in-service; issuing regular information bulletins. The Role of the Chairperson and Principal as Secretary to the Board has been identified for enhanced training. It is

gratifying to see that 91% of Boards at Post Primary level are functioning at a good or very good level as evidenced in the recent Chief Inspectors Report.

ACCS also welcomes the introduction of the FSSU to our schools and we look forward working collaboratively to build on existing good practice and develop new procedures to ensure that Boards of Management can meet financial obligations into the future.

Administrative Maintenance and Financial Supports

A lot of this financial work is done by the clerical officers with many of the day to day financial tasks delegated to them. Every Principal knows the key role a clerical officer plays regarding managing the financial controls in the school. This is an onerous role. Finances aside, the work of the clerical officer is central to the effective running of a school. The clerical officer is also the public face of the school dealing with parents, students and a multitude of others who have reason to contact the school. So too with school caretaker. Caretakers have a central role in maintaining health and safety standards in the schools. It is almost impossible to meet the need to have a caretaker on site from opening to closing time within the parameters of a caretaker's working week.

In effect, the management of a school is akin to managing small and medium sized companies. Some of our schools have over 1000 students, over 120 teaching and non-teaching staff and a large plant to manage and maintain.

Most schools have more than 60 teaching and non-teaching staff. The administrative, management, accountability and health and safety obligations of schools are now substantial. The moratorium, which has resulted in the allocation of one clerical officer and one caretaker, regardless of size or need has had a detrimental effect on schools. Schools have tried to fill gaps through the SSSF but much of this grant was already being used to meet existing needs.

We recognise the financial limitations during the recession and acknowledge the restorations that have been made in education. However, consideration must be given to needs regarding clerical and caretaking staff. We need to ensure that schools have adequate clerical officers and caretakers to carry out the administrative and maintenance functions in the school. The capping of clerical officers at Grade 3 level, regardless of school size does not recognise the complexity of their work and also needs to be re-considered.

We must also be aware of the wider financial impact the last few years have had on the functioning of schools. The 11% cut in funding has resulted in some schools not being able to balance accounts. Schools resources have been stretched to the limit and whatever small reserves school may have had are now exhausted. Budgets, that should be making provision for school repairs, school improvement, subject development and more are restricted to making sure that the very basics of payroll, heat, light, utilities and contracts are provided for. As the economy strengthens there is no doubt that the cost of goods and services will also increase. Our schools are almost entirely dependent on exchequer funding and that

funding needs to be at a level that allows boards to meet the financial demands of what in effect are small or medium sized enterprises. At a minimum, the 11% reductions in funding must be reversed.

The restoration of the Summer Works scheme has made a difference to the maintenance of schools. Eighteen of our schools have had Mechanical works, roofs and toilets completed. A further 19 schools have received Emergency works. To date this has focussed almost exclusively on works in category one and two. But there are a cohort of schools in this sector that need urgent work in other categories. Some have Science labs, Home Economics Rooms, Practical rooms, furnishing and equipment which is as old as the schools themselves. We need to look at a mechanism to provide facilities that are on par with new schools. The fabric of the building can't be changed, but the facilities can be. At present curricular needs are far down the list of categories. If the priority were to be adjusted it would allow these schools to have the opportunity to do this much needed work.

A Year of Change

This was also a year of change in leadership within ACCS John Irwin was appointed as General Secretary after Eileen's retirement and Áine O Sullivan joined the team as Assistant General Secretary. They are a dynamic team. ACCS is in good hands and we wish them every success. They of course are very ably assisted by a wonderful ACCS team whose assistance is genuinely appreciated by schools; on your behalf I want to thank Ann Marie Dillon, HR Manager, Susan

Cunniffe, Office Manager and the steadfast team of Debbie Riordan and Eileen Diver.

In wishing the new ACCS team well, I also want to acknowledge the tremendous contribution that Eileen Salmon made to ACCS, as General Secretary for three years and as Assistant General Secretary for three years before that. Eileen, last night we saw the story of your commitment to ACCS and to the wider field of education. Above all how much you were appreciated by the schools on the ground. Eileen, on behalf of everyone here we say a big thank you and wish you every happiness in the future.

ACCS as a management body acknowledges the support of the Secretary General and his officials during the employment process to appoint the General Secretary and Assistant General Secretary.

Of course, I want to congratulate Paul Fiorentini as incoming President. Paul brings a wealth of experience to his role as President, and has a genuine interest in education. I wish him every success.

Thank You

On my own behalf I want to thank the Executives, John, Áine, Ann-Marie, the ACCS team of Susan, Debbie and Eileen, Eileen salmon and Malachy Molloy for their support during my presidency. I also want to thank the Boards of Management in the Donahies and St Mark's. The Donahies, especially, taught me the value of working in education. I want to say that it has been my privilege to be President of

ACCS, to have your trust to represent you and specially to have the privilege of visiting so many of the schools and see the amazing commitment there is to provide the very best for students.

To finish, I recently attended the launch of the wonderful Arts Passport, in Trinity Comprehensive, Ballymun and I thought that the following words spoken at that launch, summed up what we are about as leaders in schools and education. It said:

'Education is to bring light, Light up our understanding of ourselves, of each other and of the planet in which we live.

We in schools move towards the Light of Education and wish it to Sparkle.'

If we can look back and say we have gone some of the way to lighting that light for the students entrusted to our care, then I think that as leaders we can say we have made a difference.

Go raibh maith agaibh.