

Presidential Address Convention 2017

Presidential Address to the Annual Convention of Community and Comprehensive Schools, held in The Malton, Killarney, Co. Kerry by Ms. Antoinette Nic Gearailt, Uachtarán, Cumann na Scoileanna Pobail agus Cuimsitheacha.

A chairde

Ba mhaith liom fíor chaoin fáilte a chur roimh gach duine agaibh chuig Chomhdháil Bhliantúil de Chumann na Scoileanna Pobail agus Chuimsitheacha. Cuirimid fáilte chroíúil roimh an t-Aire Oideachais agus Scilleanna, an t-Uasal Richard Bruton TD, agus Oifigí eile na Roinne atá anseo inniú. Gabhamíd buíochas leo ag a gcuid oibre leanúnach linn I rith na bliana anuas.

I would like to welcome you all to the annual Convention of the Community and Comprehensive schools and also to thank you for your commitment to the Boards of Management of Community and Comprehensive schools. On behalf of ACCS, I want to extend a very warm welcome to Convention to Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Richard Bruton TD. We appreciate that you have taken the time in what is a very busy schedule to be with us. I also want to welcome the officials from the Department of Education and Skills and to thank them for their ongoing engagement with ACCS throughout what has been a year fraught with challenges.



This year marks the anniversary of the establishment of the first Comprehensive schools in Ireland and three of our schools celebrate their 50th anniversaries, St. Patrick's Comprehensive, Shannon, St. Aidan's Comprehensive School, Cootehill agus Scoil Chuimsitheach Chiaráin, Cheathrú Rua. Each of them has marked this special year at school level and this afternoon you will have a chance to see a short video presentation from each of the three schools. To their Boards of Management, Principals, Deputy Principals past and present we extend our congratulations and acknowledge their commitment to education excellence for all the children in their communities.

The theme for Convention is Inclusion and Diversity. From the very outset Community and Comprehensive schools have been committed to these principles. St. Patrick's comprehensive in Shannon was the first greenfield comprehensive school in Ireland. In a recent interview Diarmuid O Donabháin, its first principal, spoke about the establishment of the school. Its purpose was to offer comprehensive post primary schooling to all the children of the area without any form of selection. The school opened with 94 students on the first Tuesday of September 1966. Six different nationalities were represented in that group of 94. The curriculum combined the academic subjects of the secondary school with more technical subjects like woodwork and metalwork so that all students would be able to learn to their abilities. Diarmuid also considered educational priorities for children in their first three years of post-primary schools as a period of exploration when young people could identify their talents and skills. The Comp as it was affectionately known, opened up educational opportunities that could not have been imagined in the Ireland of that time. Only four years earlier the concept of free secondary education had been considered untenable, utopian, socially and pedagogically undesirable and economically impossible. There was no expectation of progressing beyond primary school unless parents had money or could maybe 'sell a bullock' to raise the fees. It's hard to imagine that was the education landscape in Ireland only fifty years ago.

Fifty years on the founding mission of the comprehensive is still central to what we do; communities have changed; schools have evolved; the diversity of the student population has expanded; some of our schools have over twenty different nationalities attending. But at the heart of what we do is the right of every child in the community to be educated alongside their peers. Academically gifted students, students with special educational needs, English as additional language needs and students needing the support of Autism classes are educated side by side because each school reflects the needs of its own particular community.

Structures and supports are needed to give schools the capacity to manage their commitments to diversity and inclusion and certainly there has been significant progress in the last year. The education landscape, industrial relations issues aside, is in a more optimistic space than it has been for some time. The demands on Boards and Principals has been highlighted at Conventions for some time. There is no need here to reiterate the realities of managing a school in the 21st century. We all acknowledge that the last few years have been hugely demanding, particularly when coupled with the loss of posts of responsibility. With this in mind ACCS welcomes and congratulates the Minister on the provisions of Budget 2017 which grants a second deputy principal to schools over 700 and a third to schools over 900. In the Community and Comprehensive sector forty two new deputies will be appointed in thirty five schools. This, coupled with the previous provision made for schools under 500 is a most significant development.

For the first time in the history of the state there will be schools with a management team of up to 4 people. This recognises the complexity of managing a school; recognises the importance of leadership and creates a senior management team.

In saying this I am very conscious of the schools between 500 and 700 students and the fact that a number of these schools in our sector are schools in areas of significant disadvantage. We recognise the need for further support for these schools and have made proposals to the effect.

The commitment to commence the restoration of middle management posts from September 2017 under a model based on flexibility, responsibility and accountability further strengthens the concept of management teams with devolved responsibility. It will enable schools to identify new and emerging needs and to devise structures to respond with flexibility to those needs.

The provision of ex quota Guidance recognises the importance of in-school support for students at crucial junctures in their lives. This, coupled with the introduction of Wellbeing, can only improve student care.

The implementation of the Digital Strategy with its five year commitment to funding will facilitate long-term planning and recognises the centrality of technology and digital learning for today's students.

Certainly, these are positive developments after the extreme difficulties under which schools have been operating. However, sustained investment in education is essential to allow schools meet the challenges of increasing student numbers between now and 2025.

The theme of Convention reflects and is cognisant of the current debate on diversity and inclusion. The Admissions Bill has focused attention on the issue of religion as an admissions criterion. For community schools this is not an issue as religion is not a consideration for enrolment. However, our Religious Trustees were asked to consider future provision for students not wishing to engage in religious instruction.

The authority of community schools emanates from the Deed of Trust. While the Deed stipulates two hours religious instruction weekly it equally requires schools to make provision for students of all faiths and none. And this is common practice. Students whose parents wish them to be withdrawn from religious instruction have the facility to do so. Students of any faith can and have been facilitated with religious instruction in their particular faith where there is demand for such instruction.

As we go forward there needs to be calm and measured consideration of this issue. It is not and should not be a sectoral issue alone. We all recognise that we're living in a rapidly changing society and it behoves all of us to consider new realities. If there is to be wider demand for withdrawal we need to consider what might be the alternative provision. Does the Junior Cycle knowledge-based programme cater for all; what might be the resource implications; what values do we want pass on?

We must also avoid the perception that religion is a dominant factor in school choice. The ESRI report of 2013 shows that religious affiliation may influence parental choice where parents with a strong religious background may seek out a school that shares their beliefs. But the same ESRI research shows that the perceived reputation and educational performance of the school – judged by the quality of teaching, good discipline and a good range of extra-curricular activities – is often the main factor which informs parents' choice. What parents really want is a good school. In reality the issue of faith or religion apparently has little bearing on their decision.

ACCS would strongly contend that any discussion around diversity and inclusion must extend beyond this narrow focus. As well as religious education, curriculum, ethnic and linguistic interests, socio-economic background and status, inclusion of special needs students, selective and non-selective schools must be addressed in the debate around diversity. A real quantifiable source of diversity is the curricular options within schools and the choice available to students. The comprehensive curriculum offered in Community and Comprehensive schools provides students with real choice in accordance with their interests from an academic, scientific, linguistic or practical orientation. The broad range of subjects, coupled with an equally broad range of programmes offers students of all abilities the greatest opportunity to engage with an education most suitable to their needs.

But curricular provision is dependent on an adequate supply of qualified teachers. Good quality teaching and diversity in provision depend on being able to ensure a sufficient supply of teachers to meet the needs of schools. Students need to be taught by teachers who are qualified and skilled and have a knowledge of the curriculum. The difficulties around teacher supply have been spoken about previously but I wonder is there a realisation of how bad the situation in schools really is. Recruitment is not limited to finite periods; it goes on almost throughout the whole school year. In addition to regular annual recruitment based on a schools allocation, career breaks, jobsharing, secondment, a wide range of professional leave, CPD, changes in SEN allocation and sickness have to be managed at different times

during the year. This year teacher supply will be even more pressurised when we take into account increasing demographics, teacher professional time, and CPD on top of the existing shortages.

Last year the issue of under-supply in certain subject areas – most obviously Gaelige, Modern Languages and Home Economics was highlighted. The situation remains the same, if not worse, a year later. Schools are now reporting increasing difficulties in recruiting teachers in other subjects, most notably Maths, Science, Resource and Guidance. Short term unexpected absences have become a nightmare for schools. ACCS conducted a short survey of our schools earlier this month to try and ascertain the level of the problem – 96% reported difficulties in recruiting to RPT/TWT contract positions across a range of subjects – Gaelige 67%, Modern Languages 51%, Home Economics 26%, Maths 30%, Science 20%, (mainly Chemistry and Physics), Special Needs 14% and other subjects in smaller percentages. Planned leave, such as maternity leave presented even greater difficulties, mainly across the same range of subjects. Substitution or short term absence was generally considered almost impossible to fill in most subjects and all kinds of solutions are being put in place. Schools responses included comments such as – school has 3 maternity positions advertised, no applicants; another had 5 applicants in total for 4 full time temporary positions, English had 2 applicants, Science/Chemistry 2 but they got other jobs, Guidance 1 retired applicant, Home Economics no applicant. Another school filled a position after advertising 8 times. And the story is the same across most schools. In effect students are not being taught by qualified teachers.

Part of the problem is that all this information is ad-hoc and mainly anecdotal. It does not give concrete data on the level of shortage; nor does it give an accurate idea of what the situation is likely to be next year or into the future. There is an urgent need for a robust on-going process to analyse supply and demand. There is no point in having a look at the situation every few years as crises arise. This needs to be done on an annual basis to ensure that all the stakeholders work in cooperation to create a balance between supply and demand. We are aware that the Technical Working Group, through the Teaching Council, has submitted its report to the Minister, raising its concerns on the issue of teacher supply. We believe that this information should be made available and would call on the Department to consider its findings as a matter of urgency as indicated in the Action Plan for Education.

Short and long-term solutions have to be considered. Previously we have suggested some short-term options; among them conversion courses for existing teachers, expanding the number of concurrent teaching degree programmes to give quicker access into the profession. But we are also suggesting that we reconsider the position of PME students, especially those in the second year of the course. These students now spend much more time on the school premises but not in a teaching capacity. If they could be facilitated to teach a limited number of hours on a regular basis, not alone would it alleviate some of the problems around short term absences, but with the support of colleagues, these PME students would gain invaluable classroom experience. We stress the need for a range of measures to be considered. Schools cannot limp along as they are at present, not knowing if they are going to have teachers.

Schools need to remain current to be able to respond to change. Planning, professional collaboration and upskilling through on-going CPD are essential. The current industrial situation has made the situation in Community and Comprehensive schools extremely difficult because of the dual-union nature of our schools. Most planning scheduled under Croke Park has not been able to go ahead; staff meetings have been curtailed, many teachers are not able to attend in-service related to the new Junior Cycle. Some classes are fully engaged in and have completed CBA's while students in the next classroom have not. So too with teachers, some having fully engaged with CPD, others not at all. Going forward it is hard to see how the allocation of professional time, as currently structured, will facilitate the necessary professional collaboration around Junior Cycle.

Students need to be allowed to engage with the New Junior Cycle as envisaged. The world they will inhabit needs them to have new skills. Their dependence on us as educators is different. Information is all round them, now they need teachers who will teach them to manage this world of information and technology; they need opportunities to communicate, to think critically, to work as part of teams and most importantly become more involved in their own learning. The Junior Cycle has the potential to unleash these skills. We trust that the current impasse will be overcome in the short-term to allow it to proceed. We also welcome the clarification around the operation of the assessment task.

ACCS supports the introduction of a new model for the allocation of resources to students with special educational needs as potentially a fairer and more equitable model. The difficulties and inequities of the former model, which depended on access to psychological reports, have been well aired. If the recommendations of the working group are fully implemented the model could deliver a fairer system. The next two years will be crucial and there must be a commitment to examining the effects of the allocation and to overcoming the issues that will inevitably arise. To be effective, the model must have the capacity to deliver the necessary support to enable schools provide worthwhile interventions for students with SEN. It must be capable of recognising the very real difference between schools and be capable of enhancing supports to schools with high numbers of SEN students and reducing supports to those that have little involvement with special education.

Among the issues that will need consideration is the 20% baseline allocation to all schools. While accepting the need to facilitate SEN enrolment in all schools, the 20% baseline allocation would seem too high and inevitably reduces the hours available for distribution to schools with greater SEN needs. The use of Junior Cycle results in Maths and English as the attainment profiler cannot accurately show literacy and numeracy levels as these results are achieved after students have received high levels of support in their first three years of post-primary schools. A mechanism has to be devised to record levels of literacy and numeracy on entry to post-primary school. Provision for new schools with increasing enrolments have not been incorporated in the model. The respective roles of NEPS, ISS and SENO's going forward need clarification. Provision for training and upskilling at school level also needs to be put in place.

But above all schools need someone to co-ordinate and manage SEN provision. Circular 14/2017 clearly sets out a range of expectations regarding planning, deployment, establishing SEN teams, and collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders. In the last year there has also been a transfer of responsibility into schools for decisions around RACE. The circular makes no provision for this work other than a vague statement saying that co-ordination has been provided for. It is not possible to take the co-ordination time from student allocation. The management bodies have made detailed proposals for the appointment of a SENCO in schools with a time allocation proportionate to the allocation of SEN hours. We urgently ask for engagement with this proposal.

There is increasing demand for the establishment of new ASD classes at post-primary level. A number of Community and Comprehensive schools have established ASD classes. Acquiring the staffing resources is generally not an issue. The building structure of the ASD units are second to none. However, the actual physical setting up of the classes is proving to be very problematic. A furnishing and fittings list does not exist for these classes. For any other room in a school a detailed furniture and equipment list is available on the DES website; the ASD equipment would not be familiar to schools, yet there is no guide. This issue has to be addressed.

The recent DEIS review and announcement of a new DEIS Plan is welcome. Given that 27 of our 96 Community and Comprehensive schools have DEIS designation is further indicative of the inclusive nature of our schools. The difference between DEIS and other schools cannot be overstated. These schools try to overcome disadvantages at several levels because students in DEIS schools are not a homogenous group. For students who struggle to read, write or engage with everyday maths, supports are needed to ensure that they don't leave schools not able to engage with everyday literacy and numeracy. For the many students capable of advancing to third level it is about developing awareness, confidence and targeted academic supports so that this potential is realised. At whole school level it is about educating students and parents about possibilities and making them more ambitious and capable of engaging with education. DEIS funding helps schools put in place practical, on-going and targeted supports. But these schools are also trying to deal with the impact of fractured families and communities struggling with serious social issues. Everything that happens in the community or home plays out in the school. But schools cannot deal with this in isolation. They need active, on-going co-operation with other agencies to deal with these issues. We would ask that consideration be given to the development of some form of inter-agency teams that would work on the ground with schools in DEIS areas.

The means of identification of potential levels of disadvantage in a school is a significant change and should provide objective data as part of the decision making process. However, there are schools that were surprised they were not included in the list of new schools identified as being in DEIS. There is a need to provide an opportunity for this small number of schools to present their case to ensure the rigour of the new process.

Agus sinn ag déanamh trácht ar éagsúlacht caithimid féachaint ar na Scoileanna Gaeltachta agus na dúshláin a bhaineann leo súid amháin. Cuid de na scoileanna seo is scoileanna beaga iad; scoileanna atá faoi bhrú curaclim iomlán, leathan a chur ar fáil. Chomh maith le sin bíonn deacarachtaí níos mó acu maidir le soláthair múinteora. Ní amháin go bhfuil said ag lorg daoine cáilithe ach caithfidh bheith ar a gcumas múineadh trí Ghaeilge. Faoi láthair tá Béarla ag fáil an láimh in uachtar mar theanga chumarsáide i measc líon maith daltaí agus ní haon iontas é seo i bhfianaise chumhacht an Bhéarla i saol sóisialtaíthe an aosa óig. Tá sé riachtanach mar sin go gcuideofar le scoileanna céimeanna chun an Ghaeilge mar theanga chumarsáide i measc daltaí a chur chun cinn. Athnaíonn an Roinn go bhfuil ról tabhachtach ag na scoileanna maidir le todhcháí na Gaeilge.

Tugann Polasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta aithinteas do na dúshláin seo agus leagann sé amach plean tabhairt fúthu. Cuireadh fáilte chroíúil roimh an bPolasaí nuair a foilsíodh é agus ba léir go raibh soláthar ann ar bhonn *ex-quota* do Iarbhunscoilenna ar a laghad. Bheadh ar cumas ár scoileanna leas a bhaint as an soláthar breise chun cabhrú linn aghaidh a thabhairt ar na dúshláin aitheanta do thodhcháí na teangan. Is cosúil anois go bhfuil An Roinn Oideachais agus Scoileanna ag cúlú ar an ngealltanas sonracha i dtaca le OTM sa pholasaí. Éilimid ar an Aire agus ar an tAonad nuabhunaithe Gaeltachta an soláthar seo a chinntiú láithreach mar thús.

Diversity of provision includes Further and Adult Education in a number of our schools. The Joint Further Education Representative Group (JFERG) was established in 2014 with the remit of engaging with the Department, relevant statutory bodies and other stakeholders on behalf of FE and Adult Education providers within the Community and Comprehensive and Secondary Voluntary Sectors.

To date JFERG has successfully developed and consolidated relationships with stakeholder partners and now seeks to establish a Consortium through which FE and Adult Education be provided with a coherent developmental and compliance framework into the years ahead.

Currently there are 25 ACCS and 26 JMB schools with a QA agreement registered with QQI. The most up-to-date data from QQI shows that a total of 2042 learners from 44 active centres achieved QQI certification in 2014.

In addition there are an additional 26,000 learners attending self-financing adult education courses across 32 providers.

Community and Comprehensive and Voluntary Secondary FE and Adult Ed providing schools assert their distinct character within the national FET sector, are proud of their long tradition in this educational field and wish to continue their provision which has long been characterised by high rates of retention and progression and a strong emphasis on the pastoral care of the learner.

To this end ACCS, in conjunction with the JMB, have sought to appoint a Further Education Advisor to Schools, through a department funded seconded position, whose remit will be to assist schools in meeting their obligations under the national FET strategy and engaging with relevant statutory bodies. We would ask that positive consideration be given to this proposal.

On the wider issue of inclusion, ACCS welcomes the objective of the Admissions to Schools Bill 2016 which aims to provide clarity on admissions procedures across all sectors which are inclusive, transparent and fair for students and their parents. We would however, urge caution around the designation of a school by Council or Authority. The clause 'the ability of the school to meet a student's needs' has the potential to open the door to exclusion. Schools that have developed structures and expertise to enable inclusion are potentially in danger of being seen as 'experts' and consequently become magnet schools, excusing other schools from their responsibility to develop similar support structures. ACCS would question why a student would fail to get a place in any school when all schools are equally resourced.

Recently, I was visiting one of our schools and while waiting for the Principal met a lovely young girl, 15yrs old, friendly and obviously smart. The Principal later told me that she had only enrolled in the school a few weeks previously. The SENO had asked this Principal to enrol her after she had been refused enrolment by six other schools. It is probably no coincidence that the same child is a newcomer to Ireland, in foster care, has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. It would be interesting to examine what 'soft barriers' had been used to result in six refusals for enrolment. This is the type of situation that the Admissions Bill must be capable of overcoming if the principle of inclusion is to be underpinned in all schools.

Among the objectives set out in the Action Plan for Education is broadening the choice of schools available each year in line with the target of 400 multi or non-denominational schools by 2030.

In October 2016, The Report for New Schools Establishment Group advised the minister on the patronage of 9 new post-primary schools. No community school was included in the recommendation. Given the department's stated objective to broaden school choice it was very difficult to understand the exclusion of the community school as a preferred model in any one of the areas. ACCS has carried out detailed research which sought to examine the criteria underpinning the awarding of patronage and then to look individually at the decisions in each of the nine areas.

The report states that when a new school is to be established the process should allow for different patrons/bodies to be considered as a patron of the new school. It also cites such criteria as how the proposed schools under the respective patrons would provide for extending or strengthening diversity of provision in each area, having regard to the views of parents. In announcing the patronage of the new schools the Minister observed that:

"Parental preference has become a key determinant in deciding the patronage of new schools and I'm pleased to say that the views of parents expressed through the process are strongly reflected in the decisions I have made on the patronage of these nine schools".

In 5 of the 9 areas there isn't an existing Community or Comprehensive school. The percentage of parents who expressed a preference was low in relation to the numbers eligible to do so: as low as 8% in one area. Surely the inclusion of a community school model in one of these five areas would have strengthened diversity and broadened the choice of school for parents. In a number of these five areas no clear parental preference emerged. In one area

for example 25% of preferences were for one patron and 20% for the other. Where there was no clear significant preference among parents for any particular school type would joint patronage as a community school not have been the most democratic option? Previously, difficulties with the Deed of Trust were cited as a barrier to the development of further community schools. However, in a number of these areas it would have been possible to engage with the patronage model used in the establishment of Celbridge and Ballymakenny community schools.

The whole process raises a number of questions. Could the New Schools Establishment Group have recommended the establishment of a community school? Can the Minister direct the applicant patrons to establish a community school? What was the rationale for not considering community schools? What weighting is given to diversity and plurality in this decision?

There is a need for meaningful engagement with the department not alone on the issue of new schools into the future but also on the ongoing difficulties in relation to the Deed of Trust. Trustees who have been unfailing in their commitment to our schools must have a mechanism to continue that patronage into the future.

Finally, on your behalf I want to acknowledge all in the ACCS office for their work on your behalf. The support to individual Boards and Principals coupled with such a wide range of CPD has to be acknowledged. Eileen Salmon, our General Secretary works tirelessly to support our schools. Her commitment and insightful opinions are respected not alone in this sector but in the wider world of education. She is ably supported by John Irwin, Assistant General Secretary, Anne Marie Dillon HR manager and of course by Susan Cunniffe our office manager, Debbie Riordan and Eileen Diver. They are a very strong team and I want to thank them sincerely.

Mar fhocal scoir diversity and inclusion have never been an issue for our schools simply because our schools are rooted in their local communities and the schools constantly respond to the changing needs of those communities.

Go raibh maith agaibh.