

Post-Primary Education Forum (PPEF) presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education & Science on 22 October 2009

By Deirdre Keogh, IVEA



PPEF Representatives outside the Dáil following their presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science. Amongst those pictured from IVEA are Michael Moriarty, Deirdre Keogh and Standing Council member Mr Jim Moore. The delegation was chaired by Mr Paul Beddy and Mr Jim Moore, NPC.

The Post Primary Education Forum is an umbrella group consisting of parents, trade unions and management bodies at second-level in Ireland. Founded in November 2007, the PPEF seeks to address common issues and establish a shared viewpoint on priorities for the future development of second level education.

Invited to present their views to a Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science on 22 October last, the PPEF partners sought to stress that in this time of recession, investment in education is crucial for our economic recovery. Cuts already made are having a serious and negative impact in schools and if the education partners and Government are truly committed to the development of a knowledge economy, not only do these cuts have to be reversed but investment in education must be increased.

The presentation highlighted the following issues in particular:

The cuts already imposed:

Surveys on schools conducted by four of the education partners including IVEA, highlighted remarkable consistency in terms of the impact of the cuts in education across post-primary schools. The cuts have resulted in larger class sizes; subjects being dropped from the curriculum; the amalgamation of higher and lower classes and of different year groups; whole programmes dropped and increased pressure on extra-curricular activities and pastoral care.

Two particularly worrying trends emerged. The first of these is the fact that many of the subjects being dropped and amalgamated are those that are regarded as the most important for developing the 'knowledge economy'. Among the subjects that schools have been forced to drop are Chemistry, Physics, Applied Maths, Economics, Accountancy, Agricultural Science, French and German. With approximately 10% of schools losing a modern language and 8% a Science subject, it is clear that these cuts are having a negative impact on the capacity of second level schools to produce the modern well-educated and flexible workforce so necessary for our economic recovery. The amalgamation of higher and lower level classes in such subjects as Mathematics, French and Business Studies is a further negative consequence of the reduction in teacher numbers.

These trends are accompanied by increases in class sizes as a result of the increase in the pupil-teacher ratio resulting in Ireland coming close to becoming the country with the largest second-level class sizes in the OECD.

The moratorium on filling middle-management posts in schools is already having a devastating effect in schools, and there is worse to come. The nature of such a moratorium means that the effect is uneven; some schools have lost up to seven Assistant Principals. Non-replacement of post-holders is placing enormous pressure on the running of schools and on the care of our students. Systems which have proven of great benefit to the provision of a safe and supportive environment for our students, such as the Year-Head (Pastoral care) system, are now, also under serious threat.

Hitting our most vulnerable students hardest:

Many of the cuts are hitting the most vulnerable and disadvantaged of our students. Increases in school transport costs and the abolition of the school book grant scheme in non-DEIS schools are among the most obvious of these. Hard pressed parents are finding themselves with anything from a few hundred to more than a thousand euro in extra expenses at the start of the school year.

One of the most worrying trends from the surveys is the number of schools which have had to drop programmes such as the Leaving Certificate Applied, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and even Transition Year.

The abolition of Leaving Certificate Applied in many schools will not only have serious consequences for those children who availed of this programme, but it will also have a negative impact on those classes that these students now join. These students will now find it more difficult to cope in the larger 'traditional' Leaving Certificate classes. Teachers will have to give disproportionate amounts of attention to students who were better suited to programmes such as LCA.

Increased class sizes and amalgamation of higher and lower level classes also have a disproportionate effect on those students who are having difficulties. Many schools have had to abolish smaller classes designed for students who are struggling with the curriculum.

In addressing the question of... 'Why invest in education?'

The arguments surrounding the importance for Ireland's economic future of maintaining a high quality education system have been well-rehearsed. However, it is worth looking at the consequences of increasing or reducing our commitment to the education of our students. If we support our schools, our teachers, our parents and above all our children at this crucial time in their lives the consequences are positive and profound. If we fail to provide this support, the consequences are unthinkable.

The OECD has consistently reported that investment in education provides a significant economic return both to the individual and to the society at large. It also points out that there is a significant social return from investment in education, pointing out that better educated people live longer, are healthier, more socially cohesive and are more informed and effective citizens. The stark statistic that shows that over 90% of the inmates of our prisons are early school leavers speaks for itself.

Key figures such as Jim O'Hara, Intel, Martin Murphy, Hewlett Packard and Paul Rellis, Microsoft have called on the Government for increased investment in education in general and in ICT in particular as a vital component in Ireland's economic recovery. Investment in education will always pay dividends.

We cannot punish a generation...

It cannot be emphasised enough that the teenagers in our schools today have only one chance to get the best education possible. If they are to realise their full potential it is no use coming to them in ten or fifteen years to offer them a second-level education. The damage will have been done and for many of them it will be irreparable. We understand that Ireland is facing difficult economic times. We know that money is tight. However, apart from the fact that education will be central to our recovery, we cannot punish a generation for the sins of their predecessors. More than that, we owe them **the best possible chance** to achieve the best they can in life. These young men and women, your children and mine, will not forgive our generation if we deny them this one chance!

Questions and responses raised by Oireachtas members

In the questions that followed, PPEF members covered considerable ground in terms of the effects of the cutbacks, the need to safeguard education, the links between education and economic recovery; the need for real ICT investment in education; the effects of the cutbacks on specific subjects and programmes and extra-curricular activities etc. Members of the PPEF did acknowledge some of the rollback achieved through the Renewed Programme for Government in terms of the PTR, contribution of additional teachers etc.

In responding to specific questions raised by Oireachtas Committee members, Ms Deirdre Keogh commented that there has been demonstrable "evidence of curricular contraction arising from the cutbacks in education". She contended that "the recent range of cuts in resources and supports to schools is unprecedented in both severity and extent". She noted that "for decades, international research on education has argued that schooling is a major input to sustainable growth and employment and indeed, the European Commission has, for several years, underlined the crucial role of human capital in a knowledge-based economy". She commented on the correlation between economic growth and education - highlighting education as being "both a cause and a result of economic prosperity, both a stimulating factor for economic growth and a driving force behind the future prosperity of our country".

She stated that "education was vital in national and international economic recovery requiring increased and targeted investment rather than a curtailment, or rationalisation of investment in education and training services. It further requires new and innovative ways of how we develop our curricula to meet future labour market demands and, how we prioritise and deliver our education and training programmes across all levels and most particularly at second level when our young people are making life choices about the direction their career paths will be taking in the years following their departure from second level".

In responding to questions raised by Oireachtas members, Ms Keogh stated that "there was a need to deliver a broad-based curriculum where creative skills, critical analysis capabilities

and personal skills development are nurtured by the curriculum which needs to better mirror industry and business needs". She made reference to IVEA's having called on the Minister at its Congress in September 2009, to convene a meeting of Government departments including Education and Science, SFA, union representatives, representatives of the business community and education partners "to explore creative ways in which all bodies might collaborate to meet the needs of the young, low-skilled unemployed" and called on the members of the Oireachtas Committee to petition colleagues at highest Government levels to move on this initiative. She noted that it was "particularly regrettable that in looking to the end point of second level schooling, that it was particularly regrettable that 65% of applications for PLC places were unsuccessful this year".

Finally, she referenced the importance of "Education as an important public service and education and training responsiveness, as a key driver to economic recovery" and in acknowledging the resourcing dilemma facing Government, she commented that "our national policies must commit to safeguarding our young people (not just pay lip service to their being our most precious resource) and facilitate their active engagement as adult citizens, benefiting from the minimum of a well-rounded, informed 21st century second level education".