

## **Ruairi Quinn, TD Minister for Education & Skills**

**IPPN Conference 2012**

**Citywest Hotel, Friday 27 January 2012**

- I am delighted to be here. This is the fourth IPPN conference I have attended - three as opposition spokesperson and now my first as Minister for Education and Skills. At the first IPPN conference I attended, I was privileged to hear a particularly inspiring speech from Prof Tom Collins, one of our most distinguished educationalists.
- Over the last 10 months, I have developed a greater appreciation of the role played by the many educational organisations. There are countless such bodies, and they are always known by their initials which is confusing for the newcomer to the scene. One of those that stood out for me from my first dealings with education was the IPPN and its director Sean Cottrell to whom I would like to pay particular tribute today.
- I see the IPPN as an important partner in education and want to build on the relationships that have been fostered over the past few years. I believe that the IPPN and its counterpart at second level, the NAPD, will play an increasingly important role in assisting Principals and Deputy Principals come to grips with the challenges faced by schools in these difficult times.

### **Economy**

- I want to turn briefly to the current state of our economy, as our biggest challenge as a Government is to step back from the edge of national insolvency.
- When I hear appeals at this conference or elsewhere for changes to budget measures or the need to spend more in primary education, it worries me that the gravity of the fiscal crisis we are in is still not fully understood.
- The support we are receiving from the EU/IMF ensures that we can pay the salaries and pensions of public servants like yourselves. It ensures that hospitals can treat those in need of it, that the weakest in society continue to receive social welfare payments, and that our schools, training colleges and third-level institutions can keep their doors open.
- We cannot forget that the support we are receiving is conditional. Even leaving aside the appalling legacy of bank debt which we have been burdened with, we continue as a country to spend a great deal more each year than we take in through taxes.
- As a member of the Labour Party, building and protecting our public services has always been one of my core beliefs.
- But we cannot maintain this annual deficit.
- We are committed to protecting the Croke Park Agreement. Unlike the previous Government, we don't want to target the public sector for the type of wage cuts that led to a reduction in pay of 14% for some teachers.
- The alternative then, is what this Government has committed to – achieving the savings in public spending required by reducing the overall number of public servants.
- That means improving our health system with fewer nurses and doctors, maintaining our infrastructure with fewer engineers and architects, and yes, educating our children with fewer teachers.

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- The Budget which was agreed in December was difficult. We made difficult decisions, some of which I will address shortly. And there will be more difficult budgets - next year, and the year after.
- But there is also hope. Just this week, the NTMA successfully returned, temporarily, to the bond market. That is the first sign that markets believe we will be able to stand on our own two feet by the end of this programme.
- We need to build on that as a Government – to continue working to get people back to work, to protect those who cannot afford to pay their debts, and to build upon all of the best features of our education system.

**Budget 2012**

- Let me turn now to some of the difficult decisions that were taken in the recent Budget.
- One of the budget measures that has been the subject of a lot of debate is that relating to the staffing arrangements of our disadvantaged schools.
- My Department provides enhanced staffing levels to the DEIS Band 1 schools that are aimed at ensuring they operate to lower class sizes and it seems to get sometimes lost in the debate that they will always continue to have this enhanced staffing level.
- However, in addition to these enhanced arrangements, some schools also benefit from legacy posts from earlier disadvantage programmes/schemes and it was those particular posts that were the subject of a budget measure.
- I acknowledged that this issue could have been managed differently and for that reason I have asked my Department for a report on the impact of the budget measure, for each of the DEIS Band 1 and Band 2 primary schools who currently have such legacy posts.
- I expect to have this report available to me within the next 2 weeks. I will then make a decision on it but, as I have stated already, any changes that are made will have to be compensated for by alternative reductions in expenditure on primary education.
- I am also anxious to ensure that whatever emerges from the report will be implemented on a systematic and transparent basis across the schools concerned.

**Small Schools**

- The other main aspect of the budget related to small primary schools.
- There was no increase in the budget in the general average of 28:1 in our primary schools – something which many people had called for.
- But the budget did include a phased increase in the pupil threshold for the allocation of classroom teachers in small primary schools.
- Your conference gives me an opportunity to state categorically that this measure is not about closing schools – schools which I know play an important part in our communities, particularly in rural areas.

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- The change that is being made for small schools is that their average class sizes will no longer be as advantageous as they have been in the past due to the phased increases in the pupil thresholds in the staffing schedule.
- It is not sustainable for my Department to continue to provide a second classroom teacher to a school that has 12 pupils.
- Can anyone honestly say that we can afford to have a staffing schedule threshold that provides for a full-time classroom teacher with an average as low as 6 pupils per classroom – a better ratio than applies in most classes in special schools.
- Of course, teachers in these small schools will call for these exceptionally favourable arrangements to continue, but how fair is this to their colleagues in medium to larger schools – some of whom have to teach 30 or more pupils in their classrooms?
- Even when all of the phased increases are implemented, the threshold for a second teacher at 20 pupils will still be significantly lower than the minimum of 28 pupils that was required for the appointment of the second teacher in schools prior to the late 1990's.
- Let me say it loud and clear again. This measure is not about closing small schools.
- When the staffing schedule operated on much higher levels in the 1990's we did not have a plethora of small schools closing.
- There are situations where schools might, of their own choosing, decide to amalgamate, and I would like to encourage communities to have conversations about whether this is possible or appropriate. The changes announced in the Budget are being phased in over three years to allow exactly these conversations.
- My Department will be available to engage with all schools and communities who wish to make proposals about potential amalgamations or clustering arrangements between schools

### **Literacy and Numeracy**

- I would like to move on from budgetary matters, and also address some of my priorities within education.
- The Programme for Government undertook to make literacy a national cause. I published a new national literacy and numeracy strategy in July 2011. The National Strategy sets out in detail how we will deliver on that commitment.
- As you know, the Strategy deals with school leadership. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the IPPN for engaging fully with my officials in helping to develop the content of this chapter and for your constructive input into the wider Strategy.
- Improvements to initial teacher education and better continuing professional development for serving teachers and principals are central to delivering the ambitious target in the Strategy.

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- I believe that significant current and future long term investment in the development of our teachers will pay dividends at the level of the individual and of society.
- Among the changes in primary initial teacher education programmes are lengthening the Bachelor of Education degree programme; and longer and more structured teaching practice sessions in the course of the degree.
- I am glad to note the publication by the Teaching Council of its consultative document on the Career Entry Professional Programme (CEPP) for newly qualified teachers.
- I am very conscious of the importance the early phase of the teaching career in schools has for the long-term quality of a teacher's work. The CEPP programme proposed by the Council will enable the teaching profession to play its role in assuring and maintaining the quality of teaching in schools.
- While the profession will play a lead role in the proposed CEPP programme, I believe that the Council's proposals seek to ensure that both newly qualified teachers and the principals of schools will be properly supported in this work – through a comprehensive induction programme funded by my Department, and through mentoring, targeted training for principals and cooperation and assistance from the Inspectorate.
- In tandem with progress in initial teacher education, continuing professional development in literacy and numeracy is also being rolled out. I will ensure that relevant and focussed CPD opportunities will be provided for teachers during the lifetime of the Strategy.
- I have also asked the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to prioritise curriculum development work arising from the Strategy.
- Initial work will focus on revising the curricula for English, and for Irish in Irish medium schools at primary level. Revision of the curriculum for Irish in English-medium schools will follow.
- When this work is completed, the NCCA will proceed to revise learning outcomes in other subjects, to integrate literacy and numeracy skills into other subjects, and to provide more guidance to teachers on best practice in the teaching of literacy and numeracy.
- As you will be aware my Department issued a circular to primary schools in November of last year, providing that you should increase the time for literacy and mathematics.
- I realise that this has presented challenges to many of you but the evidence is clear that more time spent on literacy and numeracy leads to better outcomes for our students.
- The circular makes clear that this time on literacy and numeracy can be made up in a variety of ways, including through the integration of literacy and numeracy skills with other curriculum areas.
- It is within the context of this focus on literacy and numeracy that I took the decision to bring the modern languages initiative to an end from the end of this school year. That decision was supported by advice from the NCCA which made it clear that the curriculum at primary level was becoming overloaded.

### **Planning our school buildings**

- You may all be familiar with some of the changes underway in the Planning and Building unit of my Department. We now have a fully operational geographic information system (GIS) which we are using to identify and locate our future primary pupils by linking such data as child benefit payments and other such information. This is a big step forward.
- Our information is still somewhat incomplete. Faced with a rapidly growing demand for space we do not have an adequate, easily accessible and comparative inventory of just precisely what is out there in our schooling infrastructure.
- As the next step in getting a full picture of all school accommodation I know that many of you have provided information to the Department's online Inventory of School Accommodation on the Department's Esinet portal. The information provided by school principals is linked to our GIS system and is hugely important and beneficial towards putting a robust quantitative school inventory in place.
- Over 70% of our primary schools have completed the online inventory to date and I wish to say thank you to all those principals who have already completed it. I also want to take this opportunity to encourage any of you who have yet to make your school returns to the inventory to do so, because the information you provide will be very important for planning purposes and for getting a more complete picture of our school building stock.
- This year, I plan to take this process further with a sample survey in a number of towns which, building on the initial inventory, will develop at the full inventory of the educational physical infrastructure in these towns, including the standard of the infrastructure and the effectiveness of its utilisation.
- My Department is working with the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland in finalising arrangements for this. We will need the co-operation of schools in undertaking this work. It is vital that we make the best possible use of our infrastructure for the benefit of all concerned. Furthermore, it is important that decisions on future policies for investment are fully informed by a full and accurate understanding of the position on the ground.
- We can never return to the Celtic Tiger follies of providing new schools at will – often at the political direction of the incumbent in Marlborough St.
- We have to ascertain in each locality what resources and facilities are available so that we can make better use of them and plan accordingly. I thank you for your support in this area, and look forward to continuing to work together.

### **Conclusion**

- Your conference provides each of you with a valuable opportunity to network with other colleagues, to hear about best practice and to exchange suggestions and ideas on improving our education system which you can take back to your schools.
- I am passionate about improving our education system, even in these difficult times. And I know that you are too. I thank you for all of your work.