

# **NPAVSCC 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference**

**March 24, 2007**

## **‘Parents Matter?’**

Address by Jim Moore President NPAVSCC

Distinguished guests, Fellow Parents and Friends, I am delighted and proud to be addressing you today as we hold our 22<sup>nd</sup> A.G.M. here in Newbridge.

Since our last Congress the executive has put in place a programme of work at local and at national level which focuses on issues;

- Communicating with parents at local level e.g. our website and our Parents Handbook.
- Promoting better communications between Parents Representatives on VEC and the Executive e.g. 1 Day Conference and National Newsletter.
- Engaging with all Partners in Education at National level to highlight and promote our views on important aspects of our children’s education.

We are united by the important fact that we are parents with children in the education system of a radically changing Irish society. This congress is part of the ongoing development of our organisation and one of its aims is to awaken our organisation to the full potential of our roles in the education of our children.

And what of our role in our education system? The history of our organisation shows that our views on matters of concern have not always been acknowledged or accepted. Our Conference theme ‘Parents Matter?’ poses the question not only of us but also of our Partners in Education.

Many of you delegates remember the early campaign by Parents Associations at local and national level about safety on our school buses. We all welcome the recent announcement that 3000 buses in the school transport system have been fitted with

seat belts as of early 2007. How unfortunate that the safety target set by the authorities came about as a direct result of the tragedies of two years ago.

So in what context can we see our roles as Partners in the Education System in Ireland in 2007? You and I are products of an education system which many feel served us as individuals and as a nation well. Observers often refer to the economic wellbeing of Ireland as a credit to the educators and Education System. But is that good enough in 2007 and for the future of our children?

In January 2007 the National Development Plan was launched for 2007 to 2013 with a commitment of €184 billion over 7 years to Education. A figure difficult to comprehend to be honest, but welcome. €184 billion has good sound bytes. But should it bring with it terms more readily applied in a Business environment than to education, terms like economic benefit, return on investment, and education performance. Look at the development of grind school business and the threat of league tables akin to the stock exchange. Our schools are not production lines, nor our children's education a commodity item.

Our nations working environment is rapidly changing – a job for life is a rarity but learning for life is a priority.

I suggest that we need to be more open to improvements in how we do things at this pivotal time in education

Take the School Building Programme for instance. There is an amount of work currently underway and this is fully acknowledged. However, much of this work was sanctioned as far back as 1992 and is only now coming on stream for our present students. That means 3 generations of students have missed out. The planning, and especially the delivery of this programme needs urgent review, if we accept that resources are no longer an issue.

Since our last congress we have been presented with an important document – Task Force Report on Behaviour chaired by Dr. Maeve Martin. There are approximately 110 recommendations put forward in this report. The DES have focussed on just a couple, for instance:-

- Regional Support teams made up of teachers and psychologists to work with up to 50 schools that have significant discipline problems.
- Behaviour support classrooms to be piloted in 30 schools nationwide.

The difficulty with this approach is first of all how many schools are prepared to admit that they have "significant discipline problems". Would you choose to send your son or daughter to a school with the stigma of "significant discipline problem attached"? That aside there must be serious concern at how this plan is being resourced. For example where are the extra psychologists coming from? Experience shows that the Department has failed to deliver the target of 180 or so professionals for the NEPS programme, so how will these new initiatives be resourced?

Also from the report, we learn that Amendments to Section 29 of the Education Act have been circulated in the Dáil and the Minister is responding to the recommendations. These proposed changes refer to disciplinary appeals cases where the overall needs of the school Community will now be the priority. This can indeed be a troublesome area for Parents. Not for one moment do we condone in any way student behaviour where issues of the health and safety of fellow students, teachers or staff are concerned. There are matters, however, which we should all be acutely aware of, parents, teachers and management alike. Experience of the Appeals process indicates that many of the problems with the present Section 29 are failings in the implementation of procedures in handling the cases. Let me repeat that - problems in the implementation of procedures. In other words details and technicalities under section 28 of the Act were not adhered to. Clearly everybody operating these procedures must be fully informed of the requirements.

Delegates must also be aware that if we recognise the legitimacy of short term suspension and permanent exclusion, we must insist that a system of support for improving behaviour is substantially resourced. At present many children whose behaviour can no longer be tolerated in our schools, have been held on waiting lists for assessments/treatments for months and even years. Some cannot avail of the service

because the DES will not cover extra costs that arise e.g. maternity leave in the psychological service. This is not good enough. The clear objective has to be to have in place supports and strategies through which a troubled student has the chance to learn to take part in full time education in a positive and healthy manner. Let this be one of the measures of success of our education policies.

Altering Section 29 unfortunately could be seen as a short term Panacea for the majority of behavioural issues in our schools. Again – this is not good enough for our children.

Before I leave Section 29, I welcome the Minister’s decision to order an audit of both primary and secondary schools, amid concerns that some schools are operating an enrolment policy designed to exclude children with special needs and foreign national students. There is evidence that pupils with special needs in primary schools in some areas are being directed towards the same second level school. This insidious activity needs to be highlighted and this audit report is now overdue.

A continuing area of concern for parents and teachers is class size in our schools. Recent figures produced by a teachers union, shows that 35,000 junior cycle students are in classes of more than 30 and up to 90,000 students are in classes of more than 25. In 2002 the Independent McGuinness Report on staffing in second level schools recommended the creation of 1200 additional classroom teachers. Even the Task Force Report proposed smaller class size. In my opinion the Minister has committed a grave error in judgment, by rejecting the proposal to recruit the additional 1200 teachers “as it would cost €60 million and have no impact on discipline”.

Delegates, is there any parent who doesn’t believe their children would receive better attention and education in a smaller class size? The cost factor did not deter the purchase of the toll bridge for €600 million or the voting machine fiasco.

Delegates, this perspective on the education and future of our children needs changing.

Where and how can we influence change and bring about an education environment where equality of opportunity is matched by equality of condition?

As parents, we are acutely aware of the demands and pressures our children live with. We expect our education system to help mould our young people, to promote informed

minds; develop assertive personalities, and healthy self esteem with a high degree of problem solving skills and tolerance towards others.

We as parents strive to cope with their environment, to learn present day terminology, to understand relationships, sexual orientations, student issues and activities. Set these in the backdrop of the scourge of substance abuse, bullying and its affects, which often leads to depression, and it becomes more and more obvious the voice of the parent must be heard, parents must be involved at all levels, in support of one another, in support of students, teachers and management. An active Parents Association in every school is not only a support to our children but also to the school community itself.

You can form a Parents Association with the support of your fellow parents, school management plus our VEC Representatives and Executives at National level. For those of you where Parent Associations exist, consider what you can do to strengthen your role. For example, can I suggest to you that at your next open night and First Year Students Night, make sure your Parents Association is introduced to each new parent. Set up information points in the room or the school. VEC reps should actively engage with school Parent Association's regularly.

The strength of our voice nationally reflects the voice at local level. The National Exec. needs your support, and communication allows action to take place.

Our VEC Reps are now half way through their first 5 year term. Having learned the ropes, next autumn 07 we will hold a 1 day conference and raise the profile of this vitally important forum. All Reps should take this opportunity to participate. I am also flagging the target that by 2009 full parents representation on all 33 VEC's will be reached. I wish to acknowledge the support and assistance of the IVEA through its Executive and internal structures in our efforts on this front.

At last year's congress you were informed that we are one of the constituent bodies of NPCpp which is made up of five Parents Associations. Each association now has equal representation on NPCpp. NPCpp have embarked on a major strategic review to strengthen the voice of parents nationally. This is supported by the DES and it is intended to develop a strong, unified and focussed forum for parents. This process is underway with a draft agreement due in April/May. One challenge for this review will be

the securing of adequate support structures to help parents equally in all sectors of Irish secondary education.

Already, we are seeing a positive development at NPCpp level with the emergence of a Partners in Education Forum. In a press release published a couple of weeks ago it was heartening to see that parents are acknowledged as the initiators of this move which brings together Parents, Teachers Unions and schools management at second level in the common interests of students and education.

Delegates other policy issues facing your new executive will include for example Special Needs provision.

Under the EPSEN Act 2004 (Education for Persons with Special Education Needs) the first requirement was to deliver to government a fully costed and implementable action plan within the required timeframe. The NCSE was charged with this task and in October 2006 submitted this implementation plan. I'm sure we will begin to see the government's intentions in this area over the next while. As Parents we must inform ourselves on the aspects which will impact on our children and schools.

Another area of concern must be the apparent lack of an overall strategy to address the needs of foreign national students in our Education system. DES statistics for 2005/2006 indicate that 16000 foreign national children enrolled in Post Primary schools. How many of these children have English as a first language? While the DES have now allocated extra teachers to this area it does not appear to be part of a coordinated approach which must also support schools in managing cultural and religious diversity.

In conclusion delegates, I ask you to ensure Parents Matter by adopting the 3 R's:-

- Fully exercise your rights
- Engage energetically in your roles
- Accept the responsibility with confidence.

Our children's education and well being expects this of you.