

Good Morning & Welcome - One and all

On the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of our Parents Organisation it is a privilege to address both parents and delegates here today.

“Free Education at What Cost” is the theme for our congress and is perhaps best summed up by saying “free education” is costing a little more all the time for parents. Who pays is important and we see that the Department of Education bears a large portion of this on behalf of the citizens of this country. However, parents pay an increasing cost – for example – school transport, books, school levies – all of these have increased recently and this in the face of decreases in most areas of the economy. Why are our students targeted with these increases? A soft target, because parents always want the best for their children. !!

In recent budgets education cuts were deemed necessary so that everyone could bear their fair share for our current recession, our children, the future of this country, should not be asked to pay the price for irresponsible bankers, developers and regulators. During the “Celtic Tiger” years investment went down in education not up, as a percent of GDP. We now have the lowest PTR in developed countries and near the bottom of the league of countries measured as a percent of GDP spent of education.

During the year we engaged with the TUI to spearhead a campaign “SUFE” – Stand Up For Education – and in this we called for a reversal of these cuts in education and recommended a targeted investment of 7% of GDP by the year 2016.

The moratorium on promotion of teachers to posts of responsibility is affecting schools in a serious way, and some to the point of almost closure. We now have to live with the threat of increased industrial action by Teacher Unions; I would call on all teachers and their Trade Unions to limit their actions in pursuit of their claims for the reversal of wage cuts in a way that does not effect their students' education. Government cuts have been bad enough – please don't add to this by industrial action.

We met with spokesmen from most of the political parties, Paul Gogarty, the Green Party: Brian Hayes, Fine Gael: Ruari Quinn, Labour: Pearse Doherty, Sinn Fein: and we addressed a Joint Oireachtas committee on Education on February 25th. We discussed at these meetings the cuts in Education, and how it is affecting our children. The Minister for Education nor anyone from his office were able to meet with us, but we will continue to attempt to get a meeting with Mr. Batt O'Keeffe to drive home the importance of our campaign to reverse cuts.

As part of NCPpp we are actively involved with all our parents' organisations and then with our wider representation on PPEF which includes Teachers Unions and management bodies, the voice of parents should be well heard.

A major issue that has come to attention this year is “Head Shops”, and this is dealt with by way of motions later today, but it is clear that this is a most “unwelcome visitor” to our schools and communities. We are already battling with (a) alcoholic abuse, (b) illegal drugs. Perhaps the only “Good” thing that has come from them hitting the headlines (is as they are closed completely and the legal but dangerous products are banned) parents have been ALERTED to the continued major problem of abuse and the dangers our children face everyday outside their homes. We need the continual efforts and vigilance, plus education to combat this destruction that will not go away.

Something else that will always be with us is “bullying” and I’m reminded of this when I read that one of the Japanese Princess’ was subjected to bullying at her school. During the year we successfully launched our poster on bullying at the IVEA Conference and we are grateful to the Minister of Education for launching this on our behalf. We sent posters to all our schools and hope it made some impact on what is an ongoing problem.

The cost of third level education came in for serious debate this year and the means for paying. At the moment tuition fees are free but Registration fees are now €1500. For anyone with a child at third level, it can be a very costly affair and far from

free. Student support grants were quick to be cut this year and indeed with the increase in students applying and the complex nature of the application forms and cutbacks in staff at paying agencies, the VEC's and County Councils to many students are awaiting decisions on whether or not they will receive the grant and the academic year is nearing completion.

Capital spending on schools is still leaving to many students in pre-fabs that with the recession and predicted increases in students in the coming years, we must look with envy at all the vacant houses 300,000 and the over supply of 20,000 beds in the hotel industry, better use of resources could have left school buildings in a much better situation.

Did our organisation do well this year, I suppose in school report language, we would expect to see the comment "could do better" – this is no way attempts to blame or criticise anyone, but I am certain all of the officer board tried their best. We are still a voluntary organisation with people from all parts of the country and as you see from the treasurer's report all done on € 40,000, the average small GAA Club would struggle to survive on this in a year.

This was election year for Parents Representatives to VEC's and we tried to get more people elected than we had previously. We are pleased that with the exception of Dun Laoighire and Dublin City VEC's we have at least one rep on all the other 31 VEC's, and in most cases two people.

We hope that most of these reps. will join us for a one day conference on May XXXX in the Maldron Hotel in Portlaoise to share their knowledge and experiences and maybe learn from each other how best to serve their electorate on their respective VEC's.

It might appear that from what has been said so far, that we have an under funded education system, full of drugs and alcoholic with bullying, teachers on strike, basically mayhem everywhere. This is not the case. I see that we have good schools and teachers, students achieving their potential, while CAO points remain critical to most our students, it should not be the only measurement of educational success. It is wonderful to see how successful some of our young students with special needs are doing in school. The value of sport, music and drama and other programmes like SPHE, (Social, personal & Health Education); CSPE (Civic, Social and Political Education), that help towards life skills. Education should never be priced as a commodity, but should be available as a right. The real cost of education will be if we limit it in a way that young people fail to reach their real potential.