

Parents have a right to know: New solutions needed for school league tables – Brian Hayes TD

Speech by Fine Gael Education Spokesman, Brian Hayes TD, at the National Parents Association for Vocational Schools and Community Colleges Conference, Saturday February 23rd 2008

Thank you for the invitation to address this conference to-day. The role of parents within primary and post primary education is one of the most important aspects of support for any modern education system.

Parents must not be regarded as some sort of “add-on”. All of us as parents can make the most important contribution to the education development of our children. It is a role that needs to be nurtured and cherished and must be at the heart of all aspects of education policy in this country.

Too often the view of parents are left to one side or deliberately ignored in the formation of education policy. Fine words or lofty aspirations are sometimes the only things that are heard by parents from policy makers and politicians alike. I believe that we have not properly tapped into the rich wealth of experience and involvement of parents in education in this country. That partnership can often seem frayed at the edges or incomplete from parent’s perspective. We need to make much more difference in involving parents and cherishing their unique contribution to the development of their child.

If there is one thing I am really concerned about in post primary education, it is this increasing segregation that is occurring particularly in our larger town and cities. This new view that some schools represent the elite and other schools represent failure. It is probably the most corrosive aspect of modern Irish education. And this creeping form of elitism is making the work of teachers and principals within education even more difficult in encouraging full participation.

I make no apology in saying that all our schools must be models of success and must reach excellence for the pupils they serve. Schools that need more support should get more support. That can only come about when we have an objective system of realising the performance of one school or another. The current crude league tables, as published in many national newspapers tell only one tiny part of the work of a school.

Whether you agree or disagree with league tables in Irish Education, the fact is they are here to stay and the issue will not go away. The real question for policy makers and specifically for the Minister for Education; is whether we are prepared to produce a solution that meets parents need for real information on what is going on in our schools.

Every other week one of the national newspapers publishes the latest “league table”. Each table is different because the questions posed are different. One thing that is certain is that parents, students and teachers are naturally curious and want to know how their school is doing, albeit on a limited basis. Is the current information contained in “league tables” a crude yardstick of school performance? Yes. Can you make a real assessment of what’s going on in a school by these published lists? Absolutely not. Can you fairly compare one school from the next without taking account of enrolment policy, special needs provision or disadvantage? Of course not.

Parents aren't fools. They can deal with information. I make no apology for saying that parents should be flooded with information about their children's education. As far as I'm concerned the more information the better. Because the real driver behind going on to college is parental involvement and peer group expectation. Schools can only do so much.

To suggest that school X is a success because 90% of its students go on to third level is patent nonsense. Parents decide to send their children to school based on many factors. How did their siblings get on in the school in question? The kind of journey times to and from school? Is there a school play or musical there every year? Has the school a good reputation for sports? Does the school have organized study after class? What kind of supports are in place for learning difficulties? Does the school offer participation in the annual Concern Debates? All of these are factors in the choice of school and of course in many parts of the country there is only one local secondary school.

I believe that schools should publish an annual school report which would be broadly based and have accessible information available to all parents under many headings. School policy, subjects on offer and results, facilities, school buildings, information technology, special education requirements and extra curricular activities. The advantage of having an annual school report would be to compare how a school is doing from one year to the next. The current whole school evaluation is useless because only school 300 assessments can take place every year.

The advantage of knowing everything about a school is that many myths are then exposed. The extraordinary performance of many local schools is something to celebrate not hide from. How can you possibly help a school that is having difficulty when there is no objective basis for deciding what is going on in that school? Exam results are of course part of picture, but they must not be allowed to dominate our entire assessment. The best way to replace the crude league table is to publish everything and let people see the full picture. We need to know how a school is doing over a period of years and the only way that can happen is through the production of a report on an annual basis. While I'm on the subject of publication, I also believe it would be in the interest of education, if the Minister published without further delay, the audit of enrolment policy in secondary schools. She decided to conduct an audit specifically to see if certain schools were not taking students with special needs in education. It's time that audit was published. If there are any wonder why a school has a 90% participation rate in third level education, when there are no students with special needs sitting the leaving cert in such schools. Segregation in schools thrives in the absence of information. The best way forward is the publication of the annual school report.