

NPAVSCC 23rd Annual Conference

February 23rd 2008

‘Inclusion and Partnership.....Where are we now?’

Address by Jim Moore, President NPAVSCC

Distinguished guests, Parents and Friends I am delighted to be addressing you today as we hold our 23rd AGM here in Newbridge, Co. Kildare.

While it has been what you might call a ‘short year’ since our last Congress the National Executive has been active in pursuing our objectives at local and national level focussing on important issues for Parents and include;

- Promoting and highlighting parents issues and roles at national level within the National Parents Movement and with our Partners in Education
- Expanding our communications with parents and increasing affiliations
- Developing parents roles with school management on VEC’s

As a Parents Representative body we have been consistent in the pursuit of improving education for our children. In the last year a significant National Parents initiative led to the formation of “The Post Primary Education Forum”, PPEF. We succeeded in bringing together Parents, Management Bodies and Teachers Unions in the post-primary sector to address common issues and to establish a shared viewpoint on priorities for the future development of second-level education. Initially the Forum has called for greater investment in post-primary education given that we share bottom place in a ranking of 30 OECD countries of annual spend per second level student relative to our country’s wealth. Whilst we acknowledge that spending on education has increased over the last decade, the proportion of our wealth that we spend on education has fallen from 5.2% in 1995 to 4.8% today.

I share the hope of many that the present failure to fund the Summer Works Scheme in 2008 by the DES can be quickly reversed and allow all our schools to deal with the urgent works that require immediate attention.

On your behalf we have also made submissions to the N.C.T.E. (National Centre for Technology in Education). This dealt with the implementation of the schools I.T. programme under the National Development Plan. I.C.T. resources in our schools are of immense importance in the Ireland of today. In the N.C.T.E.'s most recent Annual Report it is heartening to note the progress that has been made in many areas. Ninety six per cent of schools have been provided with broadband connection and over 10,000 places on Continuing Professional Development courses for teachers have been made available. This is commendable.

This year has seen the continuation of the school building programme with new schools and facilities being upgraded in many areas. No matter how long overdue these developments are they are extremely welcome. Those cynics among us might say well it was an election year wasn't it. Whatever your view it is wonderful to see teachers, students and parents brimming with enthusiasm in their new well equipped facilities. May it long continue.

Last years conference made an indelible imprint on the consciousness of so many who attended with the presentation on 'Bullying' by Dr. Mona O'Moore. Since then the Executive felt compelled to develop a strategy on this huge problem in our schools. A variety of proposals were discussed. It has been agreed to set up a working group made up of representatives from Parents, IVEA Standing Council, CEO Association and School Principals - the stakeholders in Education working together to tackle an issue that directly affects our children. This is Partnership in Education at work. I wish the group well in this most difficult area.

A related issue is one of integration with the rise of immigration into Ireland. Proficiency in English is key to preventing social marginalisation but this demands appropriate allocation of resources. Why is proficiency in English an issue?

- increased rate of immigration in past decade
- 10.4% of population is foreign born
- 22,200 students enrolled in primary schools in 2006
- 60% of these (13,320) did not have English as a first language

More English language support teachers are required and we must move away from the restrictive 1990's approach which caps appointments at 2 teachers once a threshold of 28 newcomer students is reached.

Integration poses challenges for us as a Parents Organisation. Engaging parents whose first language is not English must be addressed. Innovative methods are required such as the initiative in one of our colleges which makes available its facilities on Saturday or Sunday to allow newcomer students to conduct classes in their own language. I am sure such an accommodation can only further the integration process and help bring all families into the main school community.

It is interesting to note that during the crisis and debates on school accommodation last autumn in our capital the Taoiseach declared segregated schools would not receive a "shred of support" from him. The vocational sector strongly promotes the integrated, publicly accountable, democratic, state sponsored, faith inclusive model, and we deserve his support and the support of his ministers.

During this debate I was amazed to hear a leading opposition politician suggest the establishment of a national education forum where the needs of parents and their children could be taken into account.

He should know that the National Parents Council post primary, NPCpp, was established in 1985 for that very purpose, with the support of the Department of

Education. This year we, NPAVSCC, as one of five parent's representative bodies assisted in the development of an agreed 3 year strategic plan for NPCpp. It is intended to secure a strong, well resourced National Parents Council. However eight months have now passed without sanction for approval from the DES while we continue to operate in a voluntary capacity.

Real Partnership begs the support of the DES and the government on this proposal as a matter of urgency.

NPCpp continues to support students and parents at examination time with the Helpline. Guidance Counsellors play an active role in this service. Again this is principally a voluntary initiative by parents providing an invaluable service through commitment. Last year, we dealt with over 3000 enquiries with this initiative.

Speaking of examinations one of the crucial issues not being adequately addressed is the increasing number of students dropping out of education. In a conference sponsored by the Central Bank an OECD study highlighted a significant number of younger workers being left behind by the boom. Notably one in five students drop out before the Leaving Certificate.

The Education Welfare Board deal with school attendance and are suppose to intervene early but a quarter of the necessary EWO's are in operation, 73 at present. We are talking about non-attendance of 15 year olds or younger. Somebody's son or daughter, for whatever reason, is failing to avail of the huge educational opportunities available and not reaching his / her potential. Underfunding is seriously hampering the effectiveness of this initiative.

"The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools" commanded a lot of attention when published at the end of 2006. We need to revisit this to impact on early student drop out levels. Approximately 120 recommendations were proposed and while work has begun in some areas it

lacks the required urgency to impact on these worrying developments. I am certain among these proposals we will find actions which will help many. As parents and as partners in education we must be vigilant that a sense of aimlessness does not develop among young people due to a lack of focus in their lives.

On parents behalf we made a submission on the school transport/catchment boundary issue. We have made known the views of parents to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on School Transport mindful of the vital role school transport plays in our children's education throughout the country.

In the Vocational Sector we take every opportunity to raise our voices through our representatives' country wide on our VEC's. Since 2004 Parents Reps have become more familiar with their roles. Our 1 day conference in the autumn of '07 focussed on our own survey dealing with different aspects of our roles and how well we are engaging in these activities to date. This information has been forwarded to the IVEA. Generally, parents representation on VECs has been a positive experience in our first term under the new legislation. There are now 3 VEC's with Parents Reps occupying the role of Chairperson. VEC's deserve congratulations for their efforts in embracing change.

We as a National body will continue to raise issues.

A priority for our organisation is training for Parents to equip them for their roles on VECs, Boards of Management or Parents Associations. Programmes need to be developed and extended. This will bring enormous benefit to both the schools and parents movement and in turn, effect the quality of education being delivered to our young people.

A strong Partnership with our management body through the IVEA has been a strategic focus of the Executive in recent times. I feel it is essential that this

developing Partnership activity grows if we are to be effective in overcoming the challenges facing education in 21st century Ireland.

Our principal objective is to support the parents in the local school and I am delighted to see our affiliation members increasing. It is vital that we communicate, inform and support our members when ever and where ever we can.

In conclusion, delegates I ask you to ensure that we continue to do all in our power to support and to challenge our partners in education in the provision of the best possible education for our children.

Their future is our concern.