

Address at AGM 2011

Paul Rowe, CEO of Educate Together, Gorey ETNS May 28 2011

Introduction

First of all I would like to welcome all our invited guests and especially Ruairi Quinn, the Minister for Education and Skills to the public sessions of our AGM. I see many old friends in the audience and I would like to welcome the representatives of the CPSMA, NCCA, IVEA, An Foras, the Church of Ireland, the Teachers Unions and political representatives, both national and local.

This is the Annual General Meeting of the company limited by guarantee that has been set up by the Educate Together schools to act both as a patron and representative of management of this network. Since our last AGM we have grown to 58 schools serving 12,650 children. We also represent the communities seeking new Educate Together schools and have, at present, live applications for 70 primary and 12 second-level schools.

This morning our member school authorities met and reviewed our work over the past year and considered some very serious issues of policy.

During the past year, Educate Together - for the first time - started working on the basis of a rigorous strategic plan aimed at dramatically improving our support services to schools and start up communities throughout the country. This has seen our National Office complement increases. We now have four operational sections, Education and Network Development, with Education Officers, at both primary and second-level, and a team of Regional Development Officers, Leadership and Governance with school support, volunteering and ethos support officers, Communications and Fundraising sections both with their respective teams.

We made some significant progress in 2010. We opened two excellent schools **Portlaoise** and **Holywell (Swords)** both of which are thriving and exceeding their projected enrollments. We have at last managed to establish beachheads in colleges of teacher education and - for the first time - courses covering Educate Together's Learn Together curriculum exist in 4 out of 5 of the main colleges. We have also established our own online courses to further address this need. However, we were deeply disappointed by the attitude of the previous administration to our efforts to enable a growing number of communities to establish new Educate Together schools and an apparently rooted opposition to Educate Together operating at second-level.

As a result of this, we concentrated on trying to build a new cross-party consensus around the necessity of our society to address the need for greater diversity of school options both at primary and second-level. I am glad to say that this was achieved. All parties supported our manifesto and we are delighted to see that Educate Together's progress into the second-level field is now formally part of the Programme of this Government.

This morning, our members considered some immediate issues of policy.

The chief issues of concern to our membership are: schools still in unsatisfactory and wasteful temporary accommodation, cuts in special needs, EAL and resource provision, inappropriate redeployment of teachers, waste in the system undermining front line services and the pressing demands of startup groups both at primary and second-level.

These are all issues that I look forward to discussing with our partners in education and engaging in detail with your officials.

Speaking directly to you as Minister and as a member of the government

I would like to convey Educate Together congratulations on your courageous decision to call a forum on primary school Patronage and Pluralism. We are looking forward to fully participating in this forum and will do so with a constructive approach that we hope will bring forward mechanisms for change that will enable our education system to better serve our communities and the rights of all.

I would like to thank you, from the bottom of our hearts, for the decision that you have announced today formally recognising our status as a suitable body to operate as the patron of second-level schools in Ireland. I would like to say clearly here today that this organisation, its pupils, staff, volunteers and parents, grand-parents, founders and pioneers, uncles, aunts and cousins and not a few grand uncles and great aunts are absolutely determined that the trust implied by this decision will be fully honoured and lived up to.

Thank you very much.

Our members would also like me to extend a specific thanks to you for your long-standing encouragement and support and your evident commitment to the education system and the children of the country.

Minister, we also recognise the uniquely challenging and difficult situation you find yourself in government and in Tyrone House.

After many years of sitting in the audience when Education Ministers of a government awash with cash were unable to take decisive decisions, you find yourself at the top table, with all the ideas for reform but the cash is, we are in receivership and the State has lost its economic sovereignty.

It is from this perspective that Educate Together - with all seriousness - would like to make the following suggestions:

The parlous financial circumstances that we find ourselves offers a real opportunity to advance efficiencies and reforms. It will indeed be doubly criminal if we fail to reap the reform dividend that this recession offers us.

There are many changes that are urgently required that do not involve additional expenditure, and many that will result in significant cost savings - savings that can be reassigned to front-line services for children in schools.

We have a significant list for you and your officials. The open competition for posts of responsibility in schools, the reform of recruitment mechanisms, the balancing of expenditure in colleges of teacher education to ensure that student teachers' rights are respected and teachers are trained to work in all types of school, better integration of services for special needs, all the way through to proposals for the better design, planning and provision of buildings. I do not intend to dwell on any of these today, but there are four key points that must be made.

Education depends on the quality of the teaching and learning environment. Children must be empowered by our education system and their rights and needs must take priority.

1. The principle must be that children come first. They are not responsible. They are not best able to take reductions; adults are. The children in schools today are our collective future. Investment in front line educational services remains the single most effective investment a government can undertake and it is the one investment that comes with an absolute guarantee of a dramatic return. This is true even of a State that is, as you have pointed out, teetering on the brink of solvency.

2. The most vulnerable and marginalised must be protected. The new entrants cannot be sacrificed because the system cannot properly allocated resources. Freezing allocations is bad enough for established schools, however, it drastically and disproportionately effects new and developing schools. If we single out the most marginalised and vulnerable for the worst of the cut backs, the special needs children and those needing extra learning or language support, we build up costs later on, we damage those children and those around them. It is short-sighted and counter productive. In addition it diminishes us as a people. I am sure that I speak for all our members when I say that we will not stand idly by while the recklessness of our generation and the governments that we chose is unfairly imposed on those most innocent and least able to withstand it.

3. Cuts must concentrate on administrative overhead and back-office services. We honestly believe that there is significant waste of resources in the system that should be addressed as a priority before front-line services are compromised. The government must address the cost of services rather than cutting the services themselves. Administrative overhead must be addressed. For those of us who have worked in the Irish primary system for many years it remains inexplicable that we operate a successful, dynamic, progressive and effective educational sector that engages in continuous change and reform but has an almost negligible administrative overhead. We calculate that our patronage and management of 3,200 schools serving around 560,000 students costs the State approximately €1.47 per head per annum. The fact that the entire primary school system is managed by dedicated and conscientious volunteers is a remarkable State asset. As representatives of this management we find inexplicable that the figures released by your department suggest levels of administrative overhead in some State sectors approaching 400 times this amount and in which there is obvious gross duplication of back office services on a nationwide scale. We would like to suggest that the government must have the courage to address the party political interests that have maintained this duplication and waste as this is central to protecting front-line services into the future. For every million that can be saved in these areas is equal to the full annual cost of 18 teachers.

In addition, we would like to protest once again at the on-going inappropriate cost to the State of the residential institutions redress scheme, the cost to the State of which has this year increased to €45million, which is the real cost equivalent of 818 fully qualified teachers in schools.

The importance of social capital, innovation and independent initiative. Finally, the government must recognise the value of community and voluntary initiative – and the opportunities for innovation that they bring. Educate Together is just one of many voluntary bodies – in education and other sectors – that demonstrate the huge value to Irish society of independent, flexible organisations that can bring grass-roots energy,

innovation and efficiency to schools and other public institutions.

I now come to the two key issues that are absolutely vital for Educate Together.

New Educate Together primary schools

Firstly, we have 70 valid applications on the desk of your department to open new primary schools. These are not virtual applications based on projections or demographics. They are applications for real children, real parents, real families. They are applications from groups of parents whose Constitutional, legal and human rights are being denied. In 2008, one of your predecessors unilaterally axed the process whereby communities could propose new schools, work with a reputable patron like Educate Together, and have their application judged according to public criteria. Fundamentally they could vindicate their rights to have their children taught in an Educate Together school, and in so doing the State got the benefit of their volunteerism. Together with your department, those school communities were able to make a real contribution to society.

The current situation where there is a 'top down' approach, where the rights of children and parents are only considered where overall demographic criteria are met is unsustainable into the future.

I call on you today to restore as quickly as possible - and irrespective of the conclusions of the forum of patronage - an open, transparent, criteria-based mechanism whereby the democratic rights of the parents and start up groups that we represent can result in the opening of new Educate Together primary schools. This constituency is represented here today. You have met many of them. They come from Dundalk, Tramore, Clane, Kenmare, Tallaght, Sandyford and Portobello, for example. Minister, Educate Together has a team of dedicated, fully trained development officers who have a proven track record of setting up excellent, thriving schools - often in extraordinary circumstances and within tight schedules. This team is at your department's disposal and may I, in all seriousness and humility, politely suggest to you that you would be foolish not to avail of their services.

Educate Together Second-level schools

Secondly, I have already warmly welcomed the decision of your government to recognise Educate Together as the patron of a future second-level school. I think all of us in this room acknowledge the difficulties that had to be overcome before this step could be made.

At this point I would like to specifically mention and mark the work of the Gorey Educate Together second-level action group - representatives of which are here today - who put up such a magnificent campaign in this area last year. This campaign was not successful. It was a trial process. A pilot process, from which many lessons must be learnt and applied in future decisions. The Gorey Educate Together Second-level group proved the depth and scope of support for Educate Together at second level. Despite a primary school population of only 200 children, the parents of 957 children formally expressed their preference for an Educate Together second level school. I would like to formally express the heartfelt thanks of the whole Educate Together family to the group for their hard work and contribution. Although we did not win in Gorey, the learning that you allowed us has made us stronger and wiser – and your work already has contributed and will go on contributing directly to the success of the national campaign and to success in other areas of the country. So, sincerely, thank you.

Minister, while welcoming the government's decision that you have announced today, I am compelled to point out that the Act (Education Act 1998) only allows for a patron to exist in relation to existence of a real, actual, concrete, live school. Under the same legislation, it is our opinion that the applications that we have made for recognition of Educate Together second level schools must be properly considered and adjudicated on in a reasonable time period since submission. These applications are for schools in Lucan, Drogheda, Swords, Dublin 15, North Wicklow, Waterford, Kilkenny, Cork and Limerick for example. We do not believe that it is appropriate for these applications simply to gather dust on a government desk.

Remembering your encouraging words at our AGM last year at Newbridge, I would like to re-iterate why it is that Educate Together wants to build a network of Educate Together second-level schools.

Demand from our students and parents

Firstly, parents of children - and children themselves - are increasingly demanding that they are allowed to pursue their education in the same educational environment or 'ethos' that they have enjoyed in 8 years of primary education. This is actually less about religion or the position of faith-formation in schools, but more about how young people are treated in schools, how the full range of their abilities is addressed, how they can participate in school life and - critically - how they can take responsibility for and participate in their own learning.

Over the years, officers of Educate Together have been approached on this issue. Ten years ago it was occasional and isolated. In the past few years, it has become a powerful, consistent mass demand from our communities all over the country.

We believe that this demand or willingness to participate and contribute is a critical driver of the educational process. If communities want schools and are prepared to work to establish them, it is more or less inevitable that such schools will be well supported, work well and deliver a level of added value that no amount of direct State resources can achieve.

The necessity for reform and change

Our communities want to participate in the long-overdue process of reform and change at second-level. Our second level system in Ireland is no longer fit-for-purpose in its current form, its methodology and particularly its exam system is out of date and is failing this generation of young adults.

Minister - Parents, pupils, academics, business people and impartial observers can see this failure. As the first national body moving into Irish second-level education for almost a century, we hear these voices who are all calling for a "Stop". We can no longer afford to choose those who are allowed to progress to the most powerful and well-paid occupations in our society on the basis of such a narrow test. The range of human skills, competencies and dispositions is wide. It covers self-awareness, confidence, the ability to work in teams, to motivate and mediate, to challenge appropriately the full range of all the intelligences. Yet we only choose to measure, narrow academic rote-learned knowledge reproduced in one week of long-hand writing and to hold this as a sword of Damocles over an entire generation once per year defining success and failure in our society. We choose Dentists without once checking a person's manual dexterity, we use the English language for

almost all our important discourse, but it remains the only language we refuse to test aurally or orally. All our most important activity is carried out in small teams, but cooperation in our exams is regarded as cheating.

We allow those to be selected for the professions without any test of character, integrity, social awareness or engagement. Critically we have built an examination system based on “the tyranny of the right answer” rather than courage to explore, to think, to imagine, to show character - the courage to be wrong but to have the analytical skills to be able to persist and find the answers that have yet to be written down in text books.

Minister - There will be those who tell you that this form of assessment cannot be changed - that it cannot be done. We are here today to tell you that it can be done. It can be done here, in Ireland today within the current system framework. We can actually work this out ourselves without necessarily copying from certain Nordic countries. We are aware of the courageous decisions made by Ministers for Education in the past. In 1967, a decision was made to abolish the Primary Certificate as almost all students would henceforth attend second-level schools. This step was the key to forty years of continuous curriculum and methodological reform that has seen our primary school curriculum and methodology maintain its place near the top of world education. The same courageous steps now have to be taken at second-level.

Four parts of our programme for second-level schools

We launched our Blueprint for Educate Together schools in 2009 and have been building on it in the two years since. At our Re-imagining Learning conference earlier this month, partners from throughout the second-level sector and beyond shared ideas, experience and knowledge about how we can do things differently. Our school communities’ collective vision for a second-level school which provides a relevant and connected learning experience for young people – one which nurtures critical thinkers, communicators, creators and innovators who are the architects of their own learning - is now being talked about across the sector. We are ready to make this vision a reality, and we believe it will benefit not only the communities where a school can be established in the next few years, but the system as a whole.

Key features of a tide of change that provides a unique opportunity

In conclusion, adapting a quote from an old English bard. There are tides in the affairs of humanity”. There is today an irresistible tide demanding change in our second-level education system. This tide is being driven by business, multi-national companies upon which our economy depends and also indigenous industry, from educators, from students and young adults themselves, and, for the first time, from the Universities who are at last realising that they have to spend almost a full year re-aligning students to the analytical approach required at third level. They are also alarmed at the continuing high levels of drop out after first year. An example they give is that students at university are required to sign a non-plagiarism statement for their essays but for the past six years they have been drilled and trained to do precisely that, copy exactly from the text book or standard prepared answers. We believe that this is the most important tide or trend in Irish education today.

We would like the sanction to launch a bright new ship onto this tide and make sure that it sails safely to the sea. As an organisation that is well used to sailing against the tide, in rough and calm seas, we have been glad to have sheltered behind much larger bodies on

occasion. As we are determined to set sail ourselves, we are equally committed to work with others that this entire tide of change is channelled safely to the ocean.

Thank you very much

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