

Education – Submission to Minister for Education, Mr. Richard Bruton Dublin Mid-West Constituency, The Workers' Party

Education – a Human Right

Education is an important basic human right. This has long been recognized internationally being enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and also in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Education is crucial for society in general allowing more people involvement in social, cultural, political and economic life. It is vital for the development of the individual allowing them choices and freedoms otherwise denied them. Above all education allows people overcome social disadvantage and discrimination giving them the ability to succeed. It is also an essential factor in accessing reasonably paid employment. Therefore, a government having equality and the welfare of its citizens as a priority must provide for equal educational opportunities for all.

While education must meet the needs of the economy there is a danger that having this as an exclusive aim may lead to the narrowing of education to mere training in order to meet the needs of business. The broader aspects of the educational development of the child must be paramount with the aim being the fulfillment of the potential of each child.

Education Level Determined by Social Class

The reality in Ireland for too long has been the fact that a person's social class determines their educational prospects. So much so that affluent areas of Dublin have four times the number of students accessing college than that of disadvantaged areas. Glaring contrasts exist between Dublin 4 with 84% going on to higher education and Dublin 10 where only 16% gain access. According to the ESRI 80% of students from middle class homes graduate to higher education while only 28% of working class students do so. The Higher Education Authority shows that 99% of Dublin 6 students go to third level. These figures expose an unacceptable level of inequality in Irish society and one that will increasingly deteriorate through the generations unless seriously tackled.

Inequality Increased During Economic Crisis

Alarming over the last number of years economic inequality which is at the root of educational inequality has been increased because of government policies. Over the years of the economic crisis the wealthiest ten percent of households increased disposable income by 8% while the poorest ten percent had a drop of 26%. The OECD's Economic Survey of Ireland (2013) confirms that poverty and social exclusion have increased since the economic crisis. Over the past number of years inequality in Ireland has been made worse as a result of successive government policy. This inequality of income has to be seriously and urgently tackled if Ireland is to achieve equal educational opportunities.

Disparity between Schools – Affluent and Disadvantaged Areas

Cutting back spending on education results in a growing divide between well to do and disadvantaged areas. More affluent parents can afford to contribute a great deal to resource schools in their areas and can make up government cuts to essential funding. Poorer areas are forced to make do on insufficient funds having nowhere to turn to except to cut back on essentials. This means that school children in disadvantaged areas get a grossly inferior educational experience. Added to this is the much greater number of needy children in these areas. Despite this obvious disparity there have been increasing cuts in supports families need in sending children to school.

State Schools and Special Educational Needs

The National Council for Special Education recently expressed concern that ETB (VEC), community and comprehensive schools carry a disproportionate number of special needs children with significantly fewer numbers catered for in religious-run secondary schools. The latter schools cherry pick the higher achieving children and set barriers to inclusion of children with disabilities. This situation is unfair and is especially so to children in poorer areas who already have many other problems to overcome. It can also be argued that the higher achievers in more well to do areas are subject to over-protection and would be well able to manage in a more inclusive environment anyway.

Costs in Sending Child to School - Prohibitive

Sending a child to school is expensive and prohibitively so for those on low incomes. The estimated cost of first year in secondary school is €800 while a child going into senior infants costs €390 approximately. Meanwhile so called 'voluntary' fees keep increasing. The reality for many families is that they have to postpone paying for essential household needs such as electricity in the struggle to educate their children. According to the Central Statistics Office (2013) 698,000 live in poverty with 1.4million experiencing deprivation, 211,000 of these are children, therefore, the problem of the cost of education is a common one in Ireland.

Basic Demands

- ✚ Development of early childhood comprehensive system with an emphasis on language enrichment as well as the provision of wrap around community childcare services.
- ✚ Childcare facilities and financial resources should be put in place to enable parents to return to second chance education
- ✚ Expansion of DEIS services to all schools catering for children and young people from disadvantaged background. This includes the expansion of the Home school liaison teacher service as well as the School Completion Programme.
- ✚ Adequate funding and proper resourcing of schools in less well-off communities
- ✚ Schools receiving state funding should be totally free. Schools should not be allowed to ask students to pay for ipads and other expensive items.
- ✚ Removal of taxation mechanisms which allow schools in better off areas and whose students come from wealthier backgrounds to avail of tax rebates and thus fund extra teachers, supports and facilities which are not available to schools in less well-off communities.
- ✚ The state to cease the payment of teacher and support staff salaries in fee-paying schools. Revenue saved to be redirected to state schools to tackle disadvantage.
- ✚ The adequate supporting and resourcing of special needs education.
- ✚ A recognition of the role that transport costs play in school non-attendance and the development of a free school transport system.
- ✚ That adequate arrangements are made to ensure that children and young people whose family lose their family home are enabled to continue in their existing schools until settled in alternative permanent accommodation.
- ✚ Provision of school meals
- ✚ Inequality of income has to be seriously and urgently tackled if Ireland is to achieve equal educational opportunities for all

Funding of Education in general:

- Education should be free to all, including migrant students and asylum seekers, from pre-school through to and including post-graduate studies, with all educational requirements, including books and IT equipment, provided free at primary and post-primary level and adequate maintenance grants/incomes provided to students in higher and further education and students returning to education.
- Voluntary Contributions should be made illegal as from September 2016
- Financial and learning support, including all the necessary supports required by people with disability, should be available to facilitate young people and adults who re-enter the education system at any stage during their lifetime.
- The learner/teacher ratio at all levels from pre-school to third level should be such as to make learning a quality, accessible, supported, inspiring and meaningful experience. No primary school class in particular should have more than 20 pupils.
- All students should have access to up-to-date science and technology, language, ICT, music, and sporting facilities and those with exceptional potential should have access to facilities which will give them the opportunity to pursue and develop this potential.
- Comprehensive and properly-funded supports – including an adequate number of SNAs who should be allowed cater for education as well as care needs - should be put in place to facilitate students with special needs, those in danger of dropping out, or students at risk of not achieving their potential.
- No work in the education system should be of a precarious / non paid intern / JobsBridge nature.

Conclusion

Education is key to achieving a more equal society - it is a right not a commodity to be purchased by those who can afford it. An obvious result of making education accessible to all would be the creation of a more active and able body of citizens. Society would be enriched with more people able to participate and contribute; the cultural life of the country would flourish and employment opportunities would be open to all. Importantly fewer people would need to be supported and a greater number would be tax paying citizens. A more just society demands the equality of citizens and with this brings responsibilities. For the state to embrace such a demand would mean finding adequate funding. One such way would be to pursue those avoiding and evading paying their fair share of taxation. Instances of such avoidance are constantly revealed by Revenue. Justice for those long deprived of educational opportunities demand that the state pursue such offenders and recoup what is owing – largesse is not enough.