

OPENING STATEMENT BY ÁINE HYLAND - for the Meeting of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills at 4 p.m. on Tuesday 22nd June 2017.

Education of Children with Special Needs

I welcome the report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Admissions to Schools Bill, especially its recommendations that so-called “baptism barrier” be abolished and that the NCSE be given the statutory power to compel schools to establish special classes for children with autism or other disabilities where such classes are required. While the Department of Education and Skills has denied that “there is a chronic shortage of specialised school places for children with autism”, some areas of the country have no such provision. For example, there is no special class in any of the 26 post primary schools in Dublin postal districts 2, 4, 6, 6W and 8. There are at least six special classes for such children in primary schools in the area, and other primary schools provide special support for children with autism, but these children have no second level school to go to in the area.

As regards teacher training, extended training programmes for both primary and post primary teachers include provision for teaching children with special needs. However, there is a need for greater emphasis on in-service provision, especially for post primary teachers, on teaching a diverse range of pupils in mainstream classes. In-service provided by the Department of Education and Skills for post primary teachers tends to focus on updating subject content and subject methodology rather than focusing on pupil needs.

Educational Disadvantage

In my written submission, I have raised a number of issues which I would be happy to discuss further:

- The deletion (in 2012) of Section 32 of the 1998 Education Act. The Educational Disadvantage Committee sat from 2002 to 2005. It included members from the formal education system as well as from the non-formal youth, adult and community sector; no member of the committee received any remuneration; its only costs were meeting and publication costs.

- The Committee recommended a rights-based approach to equality; inclusion of diversity; integration of strategies, structures and systems, and coherence of provision. It highlighted the importance of interdepartmental and interagency links, with a view to ensuring greater cohesion among initiatives for educational disadvantage. It pointed out that up to 50% of children and young people with educational disadvantage attend non-designated schools (i.e. non-DEIS schools) and that provision should be made for them.
- Many positive developments have occurred – especially the development of a Literacy and Numeracy Strategy which has led to improved outcomes among pupils in DEIS schools; an increase of one year in teacher education programmes for both primary and post primary teachers - newly qualified teachers will in future be much better prepared to deal with diversity in their schools, whether this be social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic diversity or children with disabilities.
- I query the transfer to Tusla in 2014 of responsibility for the School Completion Programme, the Home school Community Liaison scheme and the Education Welfare Board and ask whether this could result in greater fragmentation of provision? I applied for membership of the Board of Tusla through the Public Appointments Committee last autumn and was appointed in January of this year to the Board.
- I raise the disproportionate effect of financial cutbacks during the recession on pupils from educational disadvantaged backgrounds – in particular, cutbacks to supports for the Traveller community.
- I raise the issue of the dire effects of homelessness on the education of children and young people.
- I express particular concern about the very high level of suspensions and expulsions, especially of young boys aged 12 to 16. There were more than 13,000 suspensions and 145 expulsions in 2015, not including pupils on a “limited” or “reduced” school day or children in receipt of home tuition because of their behaviour or because no school will accept them. I am particularly concerned that many (if not most?) of these pupils are attending schools which are in receipt of extra support and funding, not only under DES but also under the School Completion Programme.

(END).