

Presentation to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills Regarding school costs, school facilities and related matters

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Madam Chairperson and Members of the Joint Committee, I am very grateful to you for inviting me to attend this session today and to make this presentation to you.
- 1.2 I am the Principal of St Catherine's National School, Donore Avenue, a small Church of Ireland school located within the historic urban fabric of Dublin's South-West Inner City. The school property adjoins the former Player Wills factory site; a short distance to the north is the St. Teresa's Gardens housing development. To the east, the Tenters area of Dublin's Liberties, extending to St. Patrick's Cathedral.
- 1.3 The School was originally constructed in 1903 to serve what, at that time was a small (and declining) Church of Ireland community of this area. 100 years later – in 2003 – the school was extended to accommodate a pupil capacity of just over 100 pupils, reflecting the then relatively novel experience of a steady return of families to reside in the Inner City. Since then however, there has been a dramatic increase in the population of this local and wider area. This is reflected in our school enrolment numbers which currently stands at some 215 pupils.
- 1.4 The current best practice approach to education focuses in the main on active learning and project-based learning methodologies, including School gardens and outdoor Aistear, as well as Special Educational Needs learning, all of which require space for the children to move about freely around their learning environment and classroom, or to learn in suitable spaces. This in my view should be reflected in updated DES Guidelines for both the provision of classrooms and other rooms, but also the appropriate sizes for all such rooms, having regard to the needs of their different users.
- 1.5 In general, the DES has both the obligation, and the policy-led capability, to ensure that schools have an adequate environment and provision of school space to implement these new methodologies. I am of the view that the DES should be proactive and timely in providing support for expansion of existing schools where this current best practice approach to learning and development cannot be provided due to space and accommodation constraints as is the case currently of St. Catherine's National School.
- 1.6 In this context, the expansion of St. Catherine's National School is both necessary and appropriate but cannot be facilitated on the existing property. The Department in my view must give proactive and "outside-the-box" assistance to such school accommodation solutions in these unique cases, including for example direct land purchase and transfer to a school.

2 The Planned Expansion of St. Catherine's School

- 2.1 The adjacent lands of the former factory sites and of St. Teresa's Gardens are identified for major regeneration under the current Dublin City Development Plan. The Framework Plan for the c10.3 ha regeneration area envisages a substantial new residential population in this area. I would expect this to translate to a new primary school age population of some 250-300 children. This is in addition to the new population that continues to settle in the South West City area as previously mentioned.
- 2.2 The Framework for the regeneration area includes a core principle that *"Provision shall be made for the expansion of St. Catherine's National School, Donore Avenue, in the re-development of the former Player Wills site, subject to agreement with the Department of Education and Skills"*. It is clear from this that the DES are presumed to play a pro-active role in ensuring adequate provision of primary classroom space – specifically focussed on the expansion of St. Catherine's school – to ensure the success of the adopted regeneration plan. It must be the case that the expansion of the school occurs in tandem with the construction of new housing units on the regeneration lands – which has already commenced.
- 2.3 As such, it is considered that active and early DES engagement in the planning and programming of the regeneration must occur – in particular to sanction and fund the school expansion, to ensure an appropriate timeframe for conveyancing of the land, design, planning and consenting, and construction etc. This model of interaction may be unusual or even unique in the school-building programme, but I hope the Committee can see its utmost importance and take away the message that DES policy and strategy in this area must ensure flexibility to deal with such a scenario as now occurs for St. Catherine's National School.
- 2.4 It is imperative in my view that the Department, in rolling out the School Building Programme, prioritises and pro-actively supports school development projects which are of fundamental importance as major strategic infrastructural elements of wider social and economic regeneration projects being pursued by other Government Departments or by Local Government. It is not stretching the point that fundamental metrics to measure the success of this hugely important regeneration scheme will include both the provision of adequate primary school places to support the new resident population, and the success of the integration of the regeneration area with existing communities of its receiving environment – something that the expansion of St. Catherine's National School will assist in achieving.

Thank you very much for your attention.