

## FROM CRECHE TO LIFE LONG LEARNING

*Equality and Disadvantage Seminar, The Helix Gallery, Thursday January 29th*

Peter Nolan, National Secretary, Local Government, Education and Local Services Division

---

When it was first proposed to organise a seminar on Equality and Disadvantage in Education I met many people who did not understand why IMPACT had chosen this theme and this sector. We are probably better known as a union in the local government, health, civil service and state enterprises areas. In fact IMPACT's membership is very significant and very diverse. At the time the seminar was envisaged we had over 6,000 members in education. At the end of 2008 this figure is closer to 7,000. IMPACT, we believe, is the largest growing educational union in the country. We are arguably the most diverse membership representing as it does Crèche Workers, Caretakers, School Secretaries, Administrative and management in VECs and Institutes of Technology workers, Educational Welfare Officers, Special Needs Assistants, Special Education Needs Organisers, Psychologists, Primary and Post Primary School Inspectors, School Completion Officers and Teacher Education Centres staff and staff in Adult Education and in Return to Learning Programmes. In each of these areas the union has played a role in expanding the services and in accordance with the union's objectives sought to make these services more accessible to users.

In co-operation with VECs and trade unions and local authorities LANPAG the Local Authority Partnership Body, the union has promoted one of the most successful workplace based Return to Learning programmes dealing with literacy, numeracy and ICT.

Quite literally the union is involved in services from the crèche to life-long learning. The vast majority of these workers are employed in the public service and are proud of it. It is ultimately the responsibility of the Government to provide for the most marginalised and disadvantaged in the community. The widespread composition of our delegates today shows that the responsibility of service delivery can be shared with dynamic voluntary bodies and agencies who share our vision but the responsibility to ensure that the marginalised don't fall through the net rests with the state and cannot be abdicated by the state. With this thought uppermost in our mind IMPACT's 2008 Conference debated the need for the further state involvement in Primary Education. IMPACT calls for VECs throughout the country to assist in the provision of primary education.

There is an opportunity here to meet the state's commitment to providing a school place for every child by bringing in the VEC as a primary school provider. Parents are facing difficulty in some parts of the country, particularly in expanding urban areas where the demand for primary places requires them to queue for days to secure a place for their child. The lack of transparency in the school selection process means that a great many children are at severe risk of being marginalised.

Education has a vital role as a means of addressing inequality in society. A whole generation of children in Ireland is at risk of a diminished experience of education due to the recent cutbacks in education. They will bear the cost of that all the way to adulthood. Getting things right at primary level is crucial, and the VEC model is one that can get it right.

Selection procedures in some schools lack transparency, and that the state adopts a ‘hands off’ approach to how this is managed in individual schools. A child may be denied a place for any number of reasons. It may be because they are children of migrant workers, have special needs or are from the travelling community. There is little in practice to prevent exclusion, or even discrimination, when demand for places is so high.

There are a growing number of alternative trusteeship models in the primary school sector. VECs are one of the providers in the sector who have the experience and organisational structure to deliver quality primary school education where there is an obvious need. That need will grow further as the religious orders participation declines,

I know this point will be the subject of further debate this morning. I cannot conclude without remarking that the conference was contemplated before the budget announcement of educational cut backs. It is axiomatic that the scale of these cuts and probably more particularly the nature of some of them will have a prolonged and damaging effect on the disadvantaged.

I believe that the audience will share with us the views that the very weakest in our community cannot be expected to bear the burden. Sick patients are still being asked to pay the price for drastic health cuts. It is our duty to ensure that our young people are not placed in the same situation in years to come!

I would like to thank all of you for your attendance today.