

Equality & Disadvantage in Education

The Helix Gallery, Thursday 29th January 2009

Welcoming Address by Peter McLoone, General Secretary, IMPACT

First of all, I want to welcome all of you to this morning's seminar. This is the first time that IMPACT has brought our members working in the education sector together for an event with a specific focus on education. There are 6,000 members of IMPACT in the education sector, and your presence here today reflects a very significant and diverse body of workers.

In addition, we welcome a wide variety of guests from other education bodies and trade unions. There is no question that every one of us here today is a committed stakeholder when it comes to education. And at this point in time, when there is a lot of fear, a lot of uncertainty about the economic future we are all facing, education is one of our most precious resources, and one that warrants our protection.

For the most disadvantaged people in our society, equality of access to education is vital. It provides the only real, tangible route out of social disadvantage, poverty and exclusion. A lot of work has gone into building a secure foundation in the education sector so that more people can have the opportunity to be educated. You have all been directly involved in that work, and are no doubt mindful of the need for continuity in that work.

That is why, as talks to resolve the economic crisis gets underway between the Social Partners and Government, one of the outcomes we must achieve is to safeguard equality and access to education during this period of recession. Already we have seen cuts in education spending that have begun to chip away at education provision. Further cuts need to be resisted. You have heard a good deal of talk about 'sharing the load' when it comes to devising economic solutions. Sharing the load means protecting the most vulnerable.

Equality of access, equality of opportunity, and equality of experience in education cannot be allowed to diminish or be compromised in the task of devising economic solutions. Social disadvantage and exclusion has nothing to gain from deflationary trends or currency fluctuations. A recession deepens the experience of social exclusion, which is all the more reason to make the foundations of education stronger, and continue to improve access to the opportunities that education provides.

There are a generation of children in our schools right now who will need us to safeguard their education, and a growing number of workers who will look to education in order to re-train and overcome the experience of unemployment. If we are to emerge from this recession as a society with dignity, ready to tackle the challenges of re-building an economy, education will play a key part in making that happen.

The next few days of negotiation will be difficult, but not just for the people ‘in the room’. The entire country wants us to get this right, to make sound decisions in the full knowledge that much of what is proposed will be unpalatable for some, unacceptable for others, and quite possibly sickening for a few. Nevertheless, if we get it right, the bulk of the load will be carried by those best able to do so.

And if we get it right, the most vulnerable people in our society should emerge from this period of recession having had, at the very least, the same opportunities in education that they have today. That means maintaining the level of service you already provide; protecting the standards that you have all worked hard to achieve. We should hope for nothing less than that, but continue to be ambitious.

Finally, I would like extend a warm welcome to our panel of speakers today. This seminar opens up the debate on what equality and disadvantage means in education today, and it is their experience, knowledge and commitment to education, along with yours, which sets the tone.

Thank you.

