

Good morning.

A Uachtaráin, a Árd Rúnaí, a Thoscairí agus a chairde, Is mian liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil libh as an gcuireadh chugam le bheith in bhur dteannta inniu, anseo i mo chontae dúchais.

Mar dhuine a chaith seal de mo shaol mar mhúinteoir, bainim an-sásamh ar fad as bheith im' Aire Oideachais;

Agus táim thar a bheith sásta a bheith ag obair i bpáirt libhse chun oideachas den scoth a chur ar fail do pháistí uile na tíre.

It is a real thrill for me, and an immense honour, to welcome INTO Congress to my own home county!

The Irish National Teachers Organisation will celebrate 150 years of your history in 2018.

Throughout that time, you have represented your members with distinction.

And you have also campaigned to improve investment in, and the quality of, our education system.

Only once during that period, has the INTO Congress been absent from the educational calendar – as it happens, that was exactly 100 years ago this year.

I say that it's a thrill for me to be here, because it is the honour of my career to have been appointed Minister for Education and Skills.

I have devoted my life to education, to social change, and to tackling inequality.

There is no role other than the one I hold, which better enables me to advance everything that I believe.

This morning, I want to talk about three simple ideas:

How we can deliver equality of opportunity in society through education;

How we can enhance the quality of the education system to cement equality of outcomes for people, and;

How investment in education can deliver for both our economy and society.

Before I do so, I want to speak briefly about the importance of our history as a people.

I've already mentioned your own proud history.

And I know that Niamh Púirséil is documenting that history, as she has already done with an important period of my party's history.

As a Government we are embarking on a similarly important project – to recall how our nation has developed over 100 years since the first steps towards independence shattered the silence of an Easter morning in Dublin.

Last week, the Government launched Ireland 2016 – the programme of commemorative events that will recall the rising of 1916.

A significant part of that programme will take place in schools.

One of the main events is ‘Proclamation day’ which will take place on 15th March 2016.

On this day, schools and all other educational institutions will commemorate the events of 1916, celebrate the present, and imagine the future. Each school will be receiving an Irish flag to mark the occasion.

School competitions in history, drama, art and song, will see winners perform on the stages of our most important cultural institutions.

I am grateful to Minister O’Dowd for supporting the roll out of these competitions on an all-island basis.

The 1916 ancestry project will allow young students to explore their own family connections back to 1916, whether they were in Ireland, Europe or Africa.

Exciting new bilingual lesson plans and resources for schools will engage teachers and pupils alike in all of this work.

A new summer course on 1916, based on the latest historical research, will be rolled out, from summer 2015, in every Education Centre across the country.

As a nation, we will spend much of the next 12 months looking to the past.

We must also mine the events of the last 100 years to shape the next century.

One of the Ireland 2016 initiatives I am most excited about is the Proclamation for a New Generation project.

All schools – primary and post-primary – will be invited to write a new proclamation for 2016.

The joy, the hopes, and the aspirations of our children, can inspire us all to look to a brighter future.

I am excited to see the new proclamations produced by our youngest citizens - to read and learn from their visions of what Ireland can and must become.

Delivering equality of opportunity in education

My vision for Ireland has always been of a more equal country.

Not one where cycles of boom and bust enrich an elite, and crush the dreams of the many.

But one where all people can have an education infused with passion and compassion; healthcare that doesn't discriminate on the basis of what's in your pocket or where you were born; and fulfilling employment that allows us to build decent lives.

At the heart of delivering real equality of opportunity, is education.

It is with that idea in mind that the Admission to Schools Bill 2015 is now being published.

Because equality of opportunity must begin with equality of access.

This Bill will enshrine in law a ban on schools charging parents to apply for a place in school.

It makes clear that every school must be welcoming of every child – regardless of their colour, their abilities or disabilities, or indeed their sexual orientation or membership of the Traveller community.

I know very well, from visiting schools across the country, how the vast majority of schools work so hard to welcome every child in their communities;

To give them the care and attention that their young minds demand;

And to support the integration of all children, whatever their differences.

But I also know that some schools are oversubscribed.

They cannot be blamed for that. But they can be expected to be fair and transparent in deciding how to prioritise children for admission to their school.

This Bill will make sure that is the case in all schools into the future.

It will also allow the NCSE and TUSLA to designate a place for a child in a school.

Because we cannot continue to have any number of children who are unable to access any school place.

The INTO has expressed some concern that the implementation of this Bill will increase the burden on principals.

I certainly don't want that to be the case, and I believe we can avoid such a development.

Some concerns have also been raised about how the appeals mechanism envisaged in the draft scheme of this Bill might operate.

I accept that this is a point that needs further consideration, and so I haven't included the abolition of section 29 appeals in the bill published.

I will develop my thinking on this point over the coming weeks, and bring forward an appropriate mechanism at committee stage of the bill.

I also intend bringing forward an amendment to require a Minister to get court approval before appointing an independent person to operate the admissions policy of a school – that is important to reassure schools that we intend to protect the autonomous nature of the school system.

And I will bring one further amendment to committee stage – to insert a new section 28 of the education act that will underpin a Parents and Students Charter.

There is one further point I want to make in relation to this Bill today.

There has been some public discussion about the proposal in the draft regulations to limit to 25% the number of places that can be reserved for the children of past pupils.

I am on the record as saying that I have yet to see any evidence that would support the retention of that 25% exemption, but that I am happy to listen to all views on this as the legislation proceeds through the Oireachtas.

But I have some sympathy for the viewpoint of the Oireachtas committee, which suggested that no such exemption should exist.

It is certainly my view that a much lower exemption, of perhaps 10% of all school places, is as high as such a threshold should be set.

Of course, access to education is only one component of delivering equality of opportunity.

The resources that are in place to support children have an equal role to play in this regard.

For the last 10 years, DEIS has seen increased investment targeted at schools which have concentrated levels of disadvantage, in both urban and rural areas.

The additional supports that DEIS schools receive, and the increased focus on planning in DEIS schools, have delivered better outcomes for the students in those schools.

School attendance has improved and we have seen sustained improvement in children's literacy and numeracy achievements.

Few educational interventions anywhere in the world have seen such sustained progress.

Later this week, an important document relating to DEIS will be published.

'Learning from the evaluation of DEIS' is a document that has been commissioned from the ESRI.

It consolidates all of the findings from the different evaluations of DEIS that have taken place and I see it as the starting point for a new discussion on the future of the programme.

The key lessons from the implementation of DEIS to date include:

- The importance of the DEIS School Plan;

- The importance of teacher supports, particularly CPD for teacher in Planning, Literacy and Numeracy, and pupil behaviour management; and
- The importance of developing leadership capacity in school principals;

The work of the ESRI builds upon these lessons, and suggests that:

A change in approach within DEIS schools is evident, with a significant improvement in planning for teaching and learning and in setting targets for achievement;

There has been a significant improvement over time in literacy test scores among students in designated disadvantaged primary schools;

Levels of non-attendance between urban band 1 primary schools and non-DEIS urban schools have narrowed;

Interestingly, greater impact is evident for younger cohorts of students, indicating that exposure to interventions over a sustained period of time is likely to yield greater dividends.

That last point is crucial as far as I'm concerned.

It makes it blindingly clear that continuing to invest in tackling education disadvantage, over a long and sustained period of time, is the very best way to deliver equality of opportunity in schools.

The ESRI have posed some challenging questions for all of us who support the DEIS programme.

They have asked whether the scale of additional DEIS funding is sufficient to bridge the gap in resources between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged settings.

And they challenge Government to really think about the need for joined-up thinking between education and broader social policy, such as housing and healthcare.

In thinking about this area, I keep finding myself drawn back to one important point.

When DEIS was launched in 2005, a commitment was given that it would be reviewed after 5 years.

That has not happened, and it's about time it did.

We know that Ireland has changed significantly in the last 10 years.

New schools have been established, and demographic changes mean that school populations have changed.

Yet, the schools identified in 2005 for participation in DEIS remain the only ones in the scheme.

Over the next couple of weeks, I will seek submissions from all educational stakeholders, including the INTO, on what our options for future interventions to tackle educational disadvantage should look like.

I will establish an interdepartmental group to consider the roles of different Government Departments in delivering DEIS in a joined up way.

And I will put together a technical group to establish what eligibility criteria are now appropriate to re-identify the level of need in schools.

During the next school year, I will complete a revised identification process for schools participating in DEIS.

This will form part of an overall proposal which I will produce for the delivery of future interventions to tackle educational disadvantage.

Of course, children from disadvantaged backgrounds aren't the only ones who need support to fully participate in, and benefit from education.

When I spoke to the IPPN earlier this year, I quoted the Scottish poet, Carol Ann Duffy, who once wrote the following line.

“I could be anything at all, with half the chance. But today I am going to change the world.”

I quoted that line to describe the innocent ambition of childhood, so often harnessed and nurtured by teachers and school leaders.

Only later did I discover that line is also used by Down Syndrome Ireland to describe their ambition to promote the values and contributions to society of people with Down Syndrome.

I am determined to see a new model for allocating resources to children with special needs implemented in all schools.

To put a stop to the pressure on parents to get sometimes expensive assessments to describe the needs of their children.

And to end the unnecessary labelling of children that the current system enshrines.

But I won't implement a system unless I am confident it can work.

That's why I decided not to implement the new model from this coming September.

Without a working mechanism for identifying children with complex needs, such a new model would have been incomplete.

And I was not satisfied that it could reliably achieve the greater levels of equity that I know the system needs.

This year we will pilot a voluntary new model, which schools can opt into.

And I have recognised the need to further explore the allocation of resource teachers to children with Down Syndrome.

I have had the opportunity over recent weeks to meet with Down Syndrome Ireland, and with different groups of parents of children with Down syndrome.

Following those meetings, I got the agreement of my Government colleagues to provide 2.5 hours resource teacher hours per week to schools for each child with Down Syndrome, who does not currently receive such an allocation.

I want to thank the parents who took time from their busy lives over recent weeks, to share their experiences with me.

It is very clear to me that we have more work to do to assist parents.

But I hope that the new arrangements which I have announced will go some way to help families across the country until the new model is introduced.

Progressing educational quality

Enacting a new Admission to Schools Bill, delivering the long overdue review of DEIS, and providing additional supports for children with Down Syndrome, are three areas that will help deliver equality of opportunity in schools.

But I am determined that our ambitions must go beyond equality of opportunity – we must care about the degree to which we are also delivering equality of outcomes for all people.

In education, the quality of the system will largely dictate the degree to which we deliver on that ambition.

And the single factor that has the greatest impact on the quality of an education system, is the quality of our teachers.

It is now over a year since section 30 of the Teaching Council Act was implemented.

I'm not sure the importance of that development, achieved with your support, has yet been grasped.

Every teacher – every single teacher in our schools, is now a qualified teacher.

Other countries are increasingly moving to let new graduates of any discipline work in their schools.

Often, such developments see the children with the greatest levels of need taught by those who are least qualified to do so.

That is not the path we have taken in Ireland.

We have recognised that only well qualified teachers can really deliver the improved outcomes we strive for.

Another piece of work in my agenda for ensuring top quality teaching in all schools is a renewed focus on school leadership.

I recently established a new Centre for School Leadership, to be based down the road in the Clare Education Centre.

The new Centre will help ensure that school leaders have access to quality training programmes and supports.

The Centre will work very closely with the INTO and other education partners, to learn from the excellent work which you have done to support school principals and their deputies.

The Centre will shortly be recruiting three experienced school leaders to lead this important programme.

Of course, we cannot expect that teaching will continue to improve in our schools, if we are not concerned about the challenges faced by our teachers.

That is why I recently published a circular to give full effect to the recommendations of the expert group on casualisation in the teaching profession.

This is a greater issue at post-primary level, but even at primary level, we cannot stand over a situation where 10% of all teachers are on fixed-term or part-time contracts.

From now on it will be easier for teachers to become permanent and to reach full-time hours.

Because the least we can do is give teachers security and stability in your own lives.

I also want to touch upon section 37.1 of the employment equality act.

I was struck recently by an article in your InTouch magazine.

Late last year, the INTO LGBT teachers group was invited to Áras an Uachtaráin, in recognition of their work over the last ten years.

To our collective shame, on a day that should have been such a proud one for all involved, some of your members still felt unable to be filmed for television or to have their photo taken with the President on this happy occasion.

I am disappointed and frustrated that we have not yet enacted an amendment to this legislation.

In the Programme for Government, we made a clear commitment to the removal of such discrimination.

This legislation is being advanced by my colleague, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, and I know that drafting is progressing in conjunction with the Attorney General.

I know this is a major issue for your members, and it is a major issue for me too.

We will get this dealt with, for once and for all, over the next couple of months.

Curriculum

While a focus on the quality of teaching, and supporting our teachers is important, so too is the need to make sure that the curriculum is fit for purpose.

As part of a significant programme of curriculum reform at primary level, we are prioritising the introduction of an integrated language curriculum for English and Gaeilge.

This new approach to teaching language is informed by the findings of 3 key pieces of research that were published in 2012.

This research highlighted the benefits for children of a language curriculum that promotes the transfer of literacy-related skills and knowledge across languages.

This new approach has the potential to facilitate the development of children's skills in Gaeilge and English.

And it will benefit those pupils whose first language is neither English nor Irish.

The new language curriculum for the first four years of primary school will be made available, in hardcopy and online, to all primary schools in September 2015.

Teachers will be supported by a comprehensive programme of CPD in advance of the new curriculum being implemented in schools from September 2016.

The development of the new integrated language curriculum forms one part of an overall reform of the primary curriculum.

There will be a public consultation on the future shape and content of the overall primary curriculum in early 2016.

Creidim go bhfuil an Ghaeltacht lárnach sna hiarrachtaí ar mhaithe leis an nGaeilge a choimeád mar theanga labhartha.

Tuigim go maith, go bhfuil mórán dúshlán roimh scoileanna Gaeltachta, go háirithe conas freastal ar an éagsúlacht teangacha i measc na scoláirí.

Baineann dúshlán ar leith le freastal ar riachtanais teanga na gcainteoirí dúchais.

Tá an Rialtas tiomanta do dhul i ngleic leis na dúshláin seo i gcomhthéacs na Straitéise Fiche Bliain don Ghaeilge.

Tá athbhreithniú ar an oideachas sa Ghaeltacht á chur i gcrích ag an Roinn seo agamsa.

Tá sé de chuspóir ag an athbhreithniú sin tacaíocht a thabhairt do scoileanna Gaeltachta agus an soláthar don oideachas lán-Ghaeilge a threisiú sna limistéir Gaeltachta.

Tá dréachtbheartas cuimsitheach réitithe le plé le pobail Ghaeltachta. Beidh an dréachtbheartas seo á chur faoi bhráid an Rialtais agam i ndiaidh na Cásca agus foilseofar go luath ina dhiaidh sin é.

Tacóidh na dréachmholtaí le scoileanna Gaeltachta an Ghaeile a threisiú agus a neartú sna scoileanna agus i measc an phobail.

Ba mhaith liom go ndéanfadh na pobail Ghaeltachta na moltaí a phlé agus beidh mé ag tabhairt faoi chomhairliúchán náisiúnta ar oideachas Gaeltachta, ionas go mbeidh an beartas seo againn mar is ceart.

Tá súil agam go mbeifear in ann an obair seo a chur i gcrích faoi dheireadh na bliana seo.

Ansin, beimid in ann tús a chur leis an bpolasaí a chur i bhfeidhm agus na hacmhainní riachtanacha a chur ar fáil mar thaca leis.

Creidim go bhfuil géarghá le gníomh a dhéanamh – lena chinntiú go mairfidh an Ghaeilge mar theanga phobail sna ceantair Ghaeltachta.

Molaim do mhúinteoirí agus do phobail scoileanna i gceantair Ghaeltachta páirt iomlán a ghlacadh ar mhaithe le cuidiú linn chun go mbeidh na beartais mar is ceart.

This morning, I really want to thank you for your work in another area, where excellent results are clear for all to see.

The results of the 2014 National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics in Primary Schools were published in January.

As you know, the findings have shown really heartening results.

These results, I believe, reflect your hard work for and dedication to your pupils, especially over the last three years.

The study found that overall performance in reading and mathematics in second and sixth classes was significantly improved in these assessments.

These are the first significant improvements recorded by the national assessments since 1980.

The excellent progress achieved has seen us exceed the targets set for 2020 in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, six years early.

In view of your achievements to date, I have asked my officials to begin reviewing the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy this year instead of in 2016 when there was a mid-term review scheduled.

I intend that the review process will draw, just as the strategy did, on the benefit of a wide range of insights from the chalk-face.

Investing in Education

I make no apology for believing in the truly liberating potential of education.

Equality of opportunity is within our grasp – through legislation, and through the right supports to include all children, it can be achieved.

Equality of outcome requires much deeper work.

It requires that we retain and develop the excellent quality of teachers and school leaders.

It needs those teachers to have stable and secure employment free from discrimination.

And it demands that we empower teachers with the right curriculum and resources.

But delivering equality also requires something much more tangible – it requires investment in education.

Shortly after my appointment, I realised the extent of the challenge I faced in delivering such investment.

Despite the growing numbers of students in the school system, spending on education was due to fall by €39 million in 2015.

After months of intensive discussions, I was pleased to be able to announce that the education budget will rise this year, for the first time in recent years.

With Brendan Howlin's support, I secured an increase to the education budget of €60 million.

Over the next three years, 40,000 additional students will enrol in schools – over 13,000 of them next September alone.

We have now made sure that the additional teachers, resource teachers and SNAs who are needed to support the education of those students, will be provided to schools.

Since the Budget, I have tried to build further on this investment.

I have managed to bring some improvements to the staffing schedule for some small schools.

Alongside the developing protocol for the future sustainability of 1 teacher schools, and the publication of the VFM, I hope this has brought greater certainty to rural communities.

As mentioned earlier, I have also found the resources to better support children with Down Syndrome.

And last week, I was able to announce that I have secured a further €50m – to complete the summer works projects which started last year, and to provide €36m in funding to a further 559 schools this year.

To replace their windows, or to fix their science labs or playgrounds.

That brings to €110m the increase in the education budget compared to 2014.

I think that this increase to the budget is welcome.

But I know that it's not enough.

I will always be a passionate advocate for further investment in education.

For example, I personally believe that improving class sizes could deliver better outcomes.

You know as well as I do, that the youngest children, and those with the greatest level of need, benefit from smaller classes.

And so I want you to know that reducing class sizes will be a personal and political priority for me during 2015.

Of course, there are many others areas where additional investment is needed.

Capitation rates, middle management posts, book rental schemes, investment in ICT, and of course teacher salaries are all worthy of greater funding.

On that last point, I want to recognise that this is the biggest issue for your union this year.

Brendan Howlin has made clear that discussions will take place with public service unions in the coming weeks.

These talks will focus in the first place on the gradual unwinding of the emergency measures implemented under the FEMPI Acts.

I have no doubt that the next agreement will see gains for your members.

But we will need to be realistic about how much can be delivered immediately.

In just one year, we can never hope to deliver improvements to all of the areas in education, including public pay, that need additional investment.

Over the coming months, I want to work with all education partners, to devise a coherent strategy for investment in education.

Because we must have priorities, and we must focus first on the areas that will best deliver for children.

I look forward to working with the INTO to deliver the investment that is needed to deliver equality through education.

Conclusion

Go raibh míle maith agaibh as an gcuireadh uaibh le bheith in bhur dteannta anseo ar maidin in Inis, Contae an Chláir.

Guím gach rath ar obair na Comhdhála agaibh agus ar an obair ríthábhachtach atá mar chúram oraibh ar mhaith leis an nglúin óg ar fad againn.

It has been my privilege to join you here this morning, especially as you are gathered just a short drive from where I grew up.

Go raibh maith agaibh go léir.