

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

School Completion Programme: Reflections on Current Opportunities and Challenges

Speech by Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan

Wednesday 30th March 2022

Good afternoon Taoiseach, colleagues, guests and friends.

I want to begin by thanking Fórsa's Schools Completion Branch for organising this important symposium.

You are a small, and often marginalised, group of education workers who have plenty of industrial relations demands on your time.

So, the fact that you recognised the value and importance of organising a symposium like today's – an event about your education service, the value it brings to disadvantaged young people, and the ways in which it can be improved – is itself a demonstration of both your dedication to the people you serve, and your determination to improve the quality and scope of your contribution.

It is very much to your credit.

One of the downsides of speaking relatively late at an event like this, with such an impressive line-up of contributors, is that most of the important things have already been said. And, on this occasion, they have been voiced by expert speakers who are closer to the day-to-day issues than I am.

I was thinking about this challenge as I've travelled down from Sligo this afternoon.

I was there to address Siptu's biennial delegate conference, and it was an opportunity to think about the many similarities between that organisation's campaign for high-quality, affordable early years' education, and our union's very longstanding campaign for investment and recognition in the school completion service and its staff – and in education more generally.

These are themes that Fórsa recently developed in a major piece of research on Ireland's post-pandemic society and economy, which we commissioned from the social justice think tank TASC.

The launch of that report – in his very venue on 24th February – was totally, and understandably, overshadowed by Russia's horrific and illegal invasion of Ukraine, which was launched that very morning.

But the ideas in the report cannot and must not be lost.

It's almost two years since I wrote an op-ed for the *Irish Times*, in which I argued that, in the wake of the Covid crisis, and the incredible society-wide response to the pandemic, Ireland had experienced a '1945 moment,' where the enormity of

loss and sacrifice, the scale of economic devastation, and austerity fatigue had created the conditions for a radical shift in public policy.

The Fórsa-TASC reports digs deeper into how we should – and how we can – achieve an expanded state, with a best-of-class social wage, supported by a competitive environmentally-robust economy founded on secure and well-paid work.

It notes that we spend far less on public services and infrastructure than similar European countries, with the result that we lack the ‘social wage’ enjoyed by workers and communities in comparable European countries.

Much of this is manifest in the sphere of education – where low investment and high costs to parents are a drag on most aspects of learning and educational opportunity from early years to third-level.

Neither the fact that Ireland’s school completion programme has achieved some of the best outcomes for disadvantages young people in the EU, nor recent modest improvements in funding, can disguise the fact that this excellent service remains on the margins of a stretched national education effort.

Our union has welcomed the 2020 decision to bring the service back into the remit of the Department of Education and Skills, and we have acknowledged the recent 5% funding increase as a first step in restoring the programme from deep cuts imposed over a decade ago during the fiscal crisis.

But we will need to do much more to adequately meet the needs of the young people for whom the school completion service is an essential pathway to fulfilling their educational – and life – potential.

Taoiseach, you are familiar with Fórsa’s campaign for SCP employees to be given the same employment status as other public servants, and I’m not going to labour the point at an event like today’s.

But I will repeat that the incredible contribution that school completion staff provide to children and communities, IS a public service – and they should be treated as valued public servants.

Before I invite An Taoiseach to speak, I want to return to the huge challenge presented by the war in Ukraine, and what its fallout means for us.

Like everyone else, I have been shocked and disgusted by the killing, destruction, and displacement caused by President Putin’s aggression.

Like everyone else, I have been inspired by the spirited resistance of ordinary Ukrainians, and their determination to resist – at great cost – this unprovoked attack on democracy, self-determination and sovereignty.

And like everyone else, I’ve been impressed by the European and international reaction – and the Irish public’s generous response to humanitarian appeals from the Irish Red Cross and other agencies.

My colleagues and I were overwhelmed by the response of Fórsa member and branches after we launched our Ukraine Solidarity Appeal, which raised half a million euro in humanitarian aid.

Ireland's official response has been laudable too, not least the waiving of visa restrictions and the decision to allow Ukrainians to work or claim benefits from the day they set foot in Ireland.

The clear message – that Ukrainian refugees are welcome here – is a source of pride, and I hope that this spirit will quickly become a model for Ireland's future treatment of asylum-seekers, regardless of what country or continent they set out from before they reach our shores.

At the same time, let's not underestimate the challenges that lie ahead as the war, inevitably, moves down the news agenda.

Our school system is already under huge pressure. It's heartening to see so many schools going out of their way to welcome and include Ukrainian children.

But we need to ensure that the task is shared among the entire education community, and not simply left to the DEIS and other schools that habitually extend a welcome to disadvantaged or troubled kids.

And – if we're in this for the long haul, as I fear we are – we need to take steps now to underpin cohesion across society, by ensuring that children and families of all backgrounds feel they have access to high quality and affordable education.

This is likely to become a significant challenge across public policy areas including health and housing, and it can only be met adequately and equitably by an expanded State capable of funding and delivering the public services that all people need and demand.

With that, it is now my great pleasure to introduce An Taoiseach Micheál Martin, who has taken time out of an exceptionally busy schedule to be with us this afternoon.

As Minister for Education, you initiated the formation of the school completion programme.

You expressed your commitment to the service in your inaugural address as Taoiseach, and you have given us the time to present our views and ideas on many occasions over the years.

You are very welcome here this afternoon, and we look forward to hearing your contribution.

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