

CORK CITY LEARNING FORUM

Plenary Meeting, October 20th, 2005

Proceedings

Welcome and Opening Remarks: – Mr. Ted Owens, Chair, Cork City Learning Forum and CEO City of Cork VEC.

Mr. Owens opened the session by introducing himself as the new chair of the Learning Forum, and CEO of the VEC. He said he was very pleased to have been elected to the position of chair, as he sees that the objectives of the Learning Forum are important for promoting learning in Cork. He also stressed that the Learning Forum, with its emphasis on concrete actions for promoting learning and participation, has developed into an effective organisation, and he looked forward to working with the group in the future.

Progress Reports: Working Groups, Membership Review

– Marcela Whelan, Learning Forum Development Worker.

Marcela began with a report on recent developments in the working groups.

Economic Working Group

The feedback report on Discovery 2005 was overwhelmingly positive. Planning is underway for Discovery 2006, the main priority being to secure sponsorship, ideally including an anchor sponsor to secure equivalent funds to the startup funding supplied by Forfás last year. A funding proposal pack is in production, and includes a CD of footage taken at the first event. The group has identified and begun approaching target companies and contacts for funding. CIT was thanked for being the first to offer financial support to the project.

The main suggestion for improvement was the presence of more interactive activities. Marcela attended the BA Science festival in September to identify and link with new exhibitors, this was very successful.

The location and dates for Discovery 2006 have been problematic but City Hall has now been confirmed as the optimum location for the event. Consultation took place between all stakeholders as to the best time of year for this exhibition. This decision will be taken in the coming weeks.

The Institute Guidance Counsellors and Teacher's Education Centre have also been approached, and have agreed to consult on planning.

Lifelong Learning Working Group

Thanks to the continuing commitment of the VEC, funding equivalent to 2005 has been secured for the employment of the Festival Development Worker. The working group will be convened very shortly, and will commence planning for 2006 Lifelong Learning Festival.

The next step is to meet with the Community Education Forum to explore the feedback from last year, and so ensure the community event organisers have the support they require. Planning will begin in earnest with an event combining celebration/acknowledgement of 2005 with beginning the promotion of 2006.

A publicity stand was present at the recent Adult Education Exhibition in City Hall. This showed good penetration of the festival and its logo among the general public, and participants from last year were delighted to see their contribution was featured in the photographic display.

Now that the festival has been established and grown to a substantial size, to justify continued expenditure in terms of time, effort and money, the festival will have to show that it has an impact. Therefore, performance indicators will be developed for the '06 festival.

Access and Participation Working Group – Survey

In recent years, the education system has been undergoing major changes. Since the original survey was completed new information has been made available, from the OECD and the Higher Education Authority for example. These reports and recommendations, plus new initiatives coming on stream and becoming more familiar– National Qualification Authority framework, FETAC and HETAC links, and now the final report of the Educational and Disadvantage Ctte. are important developments in the Irish education arena, and will be integrated into the final study.

Marcela attended the annual conference of the Forum for the Advancement of Continuing Education in UCC this summer, (thanks to Marian Elders in the Centre for Adult and Continuing) which afforded the opportunity to gather information on Access and Participation initiatives in the UK and further afield. The collation of data from 2004 and 2005 will shortly begin, and this will also become part of the survey. These developments will add to the considerable work already done on this project.

Membership Review

Among the key tasks set for the Development Worker were:

- to make communication within the Forum as effective as possible
- to investigate how the forum has evolved since it's inception and
- to generate new ideas for action into the future

To that end, over the summer members were contacted, details were updated and relevant information was gathered from approx. 2/3 of the membership. The Cork City Learning Forum has 82 member groups and about 60 very active members. The workshop session later in the day gave some of those not interviewed an opportunity to contribute.

The main finding of these meetings was that members' felt networking and information sharing could be increased. Therefore a membership database has been developed, which will provide

- contact information,
- information on other groups, committees etc. that each member links with,
- other relevant areas of interest,
- It will also assist members clarifying the group each member is representing.

In workshop sessions, members will have the opportunity to decide how best to make this directory available from among a range of options.

Also in the workshop sessions, topics arising from the member meetings were to be discussed. In the last two years, the three working groups have each had a specific programme of work, and soon it will be time to move these initiatives forward, making room for new projects. In member interviews suggestions were also made, as to areas where members felt they could benefit from information, or areas the Forum could consider as a focus for action in the future.

School-age Childcare Initiative

– Kathryn O'Riordan, Co-ordinator, Cork City Childcare Company.

Cork City Childcare Company is one of 33 groups in the Country advising on the development of out of school childcare services. The Dept. of Justice, equality and Law reform is currently accepting applications for capital grants to develop these services. €200,000 is available under this scheme. Copies of the executive summary and guidelines from 'Developing School-age Childcare, the report of the working group of the National Childcare Co-ordinating Ctte.' were available. Kathryn outlined what out of school services entail, and stressed the importance of these services for working parents, and the economy. The Cork City Childcare Company was holding information workshops for anyone interested in developing such a service in their Penrose Wharf premises on Oct. 27th, from 4-5 or 7-8pm.

(Information Leaflet: Appendix 2)

Keynote Presentations

Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage- An Outline of the Work of the Educational Disadvantage Committee

– Prof. Áine Hyland, Chair, Educational Disadvantage Ctte.

This was the first public airing of the final report of the Educational Disadvantage Committee (EDC), which was convened by Michael Woods, the then Minister for Education, in 2002. The report was submitted to the current minister, Mary Hanafin at the end of August, and will soon be released publicly. The group was set up in response to section 32 of the Education Act, 1998, and has previously issued four submissions to the government. It met thirty times in its period of tenure.

Although the Education Act which led to the foundation of the committee refers to education in the school system alone, the committee comprised representatives of the total community involved in education. The sharing of experience was a learning experience for all, and the best scenario in terms of the representation of all involved in tackling educational disadvantage. National and international strategies confirm that an integrated approach is to be recommended.

While previous reports of the committee were incorporated into the new DEIS plan, the final report of the EDC adds to and compliments DEIS by integrating school and non-school based responses. The DEIS plan commits to achieving solutions to educational disadvantage at school level as a foundation for increasing retention and transfer to Higher Education, but the EDC proposes locating the solutions to educational disadvantage within a lifelong learning framework.

New initiatives to tackle the issues involved are especially topical at the moment - mention was made of recent press, where it has been revealed that school completion statistics have not changed since the Green Paper in 1995. The deficit model has been the basis for most policy interventions in recent years, but the new approach is one based on social justice, accommodating diversity and achieving equality of participation. This is seen as the method of realising the committee's vision of a truly Lifelong Learning society

The goals of the EDC report are to:

- 1: Achieve educational equality in the broader context of achieving social inclusion
- 2: Provide inclusive opportunities for learning at all stages of the life cycle, from birth onwards.
- 3: Improve the mainstream education system so that all young people aged 3 to 18 receive an education that is appropriate to their needs.

Principles which must inform strategies for educational equality:

- Rights-based approach
- Inclusion of diversity
- Integration of strategies, structures and systems
- Coherence of provision
- Focused target-setting and measurement
- Monitoring of outcomes and results.

Elements necessary for achieving a targeted, comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to addressing disadvantage in a school context include:

- Curriculum adaptation
- Smaller classes
- Pre-school provision
- Parental involvement
- Unity of purpose within the school organisation
- Adequate financial resources for schools
- Involvement of other community agencies.

Despite the above essential elements, the point was made that the Dept. of Education needs to remain open to other models, e.g. spending, class size. Prof. Hyland ended with the suggestion that 40 million euro in 5 yrs may not be enough to fully effect change.

(PowerPoint slides: Appendix 3)

Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools- An Introduction to the DEIS Programme

– Dominic Sullivan, Asst. Principal Officer, Dept. Education and Science Regional Office.

A review has been undertaken of all schools, redefining the terms by which disadvantaged status is allocated. This study will be completed by the end of the year; currently the response rate is 96%, with the Dept. of Education hoping to attain full completion. DEIS is a phased plan over the next five years, which will be subject to regular reviews, and will address and expand upon the provisions in the Education Act.

As an illustration of the increase in the level of investment in this area over recent years, Mr. Sullivan told the group that the Government spending on education in 1988 was £50M (€63.5M), but in 2005 to date it had increased to €120M, excluding DEIS.

To date progress has been made in the following areas:

- Targeted supports for disadvantaged schools and vulnerable groups,
- The National Education Welfare Board has been established,
- Necessary curricular reform has taken place, and
- There has been more provision for professional development for teachers.

The key concerns to be addressed under DEIS are

- To ensure best definition of disadvantage,
- To address the areas of early childhood education,
- To tackle literacy and numeracy issues, measurement and integration of services and
- To allow greater options for professional development

Key actions under the DEIS plan currently include:

- Early childhood education, which requires interdepartmental co-operation
- Tackling issues early
- More sabbaticals for professional development
- Equity of access to third level
- Local actions, which will be easier now due to regional office
- Wider family/ community literacy issues impact

A question was raised as to information on post-primary designation, pointing out that the third level needs this information for their educational inclusion programmes. This was identified as an issue to be followed up.

(PowerPoint slides: Appendix 4)

An Overview of the DEIS Reading Recovery Programme

– Satty O’Riordan, Reading Recovery Programme Teacher Leader.

The recent Dept. of Education and Science Social Inclusion Audit identified schools who are eligible for ‘disadvantaged status’, and of these, 12 schools in Cork have chosen to opt in to the Reading Recovery pilot programme this year. This programme has been running in Monaghan for 3 years, and is to be rolled out gradually on a nationwide basis as one initiative under the DEIS Action Plan.

Children are identified as those in the lowest 10% achievement category for reading and writing among their class group at age 6, approximately 1 year after starting school.

A graph showing ability by age for average and low progress readers illustrated how the achievement gap grows from age 5 to 10, proving that early intervention is crucial to facilitating the low progress child in catching up with their peer group before too much time has passed. The aim is to bring the low progress reader up to the average for the peer group.

The programme consists of a 1-1 early intervention system, where each child follows a tailored programme for 12-24 weeks, 30 minutes a day. Research has shown that different children have different ways of being stuck, but good readers use a variety of strategies to decode words: picture, syntax, spelling etc. Reading Recovery works out which strategy/ies a child is using, and works to add others. Approx. 2/3 of children stay on the programme for 12-18 weeks, some more and some less.

Follow up studies suggest that 50% of children are in the top 50% of their class group having completed the programme.

Ms. O'Riordan told the group of her experience as a teacher in inner city Dublin, working with disadvantaged children for the past number of years. She explained that usually, primary teachers come from a middle class background, and they are taught to teach average children. This unwittingly leads to teachers not having the skills to understand the issues and solutions, hence the specialised training patented as Reading Recovery, which was developed in New Zealand in the 1970's.

The Matthews effect, identified by Stanovitch in 1986 was explained to the group. This is where a strong reader will self-reinforce, reading more and therefore learning more, whereas those who do not experience achievement will be disinclined to read, and therefore will not progress at the same rate. Further, research carried out by the Educational Research Centre (Drumcondra) for the Educational Disadvantage Ctte., identified that the effects of poverty and social exclusion are subject to a multiplier effect within schools with a high number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The impact of successful completion of the reading recovery programme has been found to have a whole life effect. Additionally, reading recovery children often end up top of class, which in turn upgrades whole-school expectations. The process also conserves resources allocated to special needs assistance: if after Reading Recovery the child has failed to make progress, then they are referred for further help.

Satty concluded with an illustration of the progress made by one child on the programme.

(PowerPoint slides: Appendix 5)

Workshops

Identifying Possible Future Actions for Cork City Learning Forum

Facilitators – Nicola Tallon, Elmarie McCarthy, Marcela Whelan

Generally members felt that the format of Plenaries should not change, but they agreed that there should be a greater level of awareness of the agencies involved in the Forum and their activities. In discussion groups, the following was generally agreed from the list of suggested points.

Membership Database, Profile of Forum, Plenary Structure

- Existence of forum should be in the public domain
- Need for both directory & web-based format
 - Should list member organisation, organisation details and contact person. Contact details need to be by individual preference. Suggestion: default email- Learning Forum
 - Could potentially link to other websites e.g. Institute of Guidance Counsellors etc
- Information through use of member newsletters, eg CDB news
- Information leaflet to be available in local services/facilities
- Useful as a networking tool/sharing info
- Short, snappy useful presentations of particular interest to members, eg. Format of 20/10/05

Proposed Future Priorities

- Service Provision Audit. Joined-up thinking on non-school retention programmes, including
 - all providers, early leaving initiatives, workbased supports, vocational courses, NWB, etc.
- Special needs provision
- Family Literacy, esp. connecting early years & libraries
- Supports to new communities/minority groups
- Health education
- Certification of courses for older people, esp FETAC module writing
- Community Activism/Citizen Education
 - Volunteering, Capacity building, Mentoring
 - Accredited Prior Learning/Skill Recognition
 - Support local people with specific skills to access VEC Tutor Training Scheme
 - Skillshare directory

Feedback

As time was short, the chair requested the group chose 3 top priorities. These were identified as:

- 1 Joined up action, through networking and information sharing
- 2: Investigate mentoring/community skills register
- 3: Accredited support for mature/work based learning

Closing comments

The meeting was closed by Mr. Owens, who reiterated that the Cork City Learning Forum had succeeded in becoming an action based grouping, and it must ensure it remains so. He also expressed his appreciation to the Dept. of Education and Science for the continued use of the facilities in Mahon.

Appendices:

1. List of Members Attending
2. Cork City Childcare Co. Ltd. Leaflet: Out of School Services
3. PowerPoint slides: Report of the Educational Disadvantage Ctte.
4. PowerPoint slides: DEIS
5. PowerPoint slides: Reading Recovery