

Topical Issues Debate on School Enrolments

Eoghan Murphy TD

11th March 2014

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: If it is order, perhaps we might take the Minister's reply immediately. This matter relates to his constituency and he is aware of it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lyons): The Deputy is requesting that the Minister reply immediately.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Yes.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lyons): Is that acceptable to the Minister?

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): It is. We do our business very smartly in the constituency of Dublin South-East.

Primary enrolments, which have already risen substantially in recent years, are projected to rise by more than 37,000 pupils by 2015. They are set to continue to rise with a likely peak at approximately 596,000 pupils to be catered for in 2019. This compares with 526,000 pupils enrolled in primary schools in the last academic year.

The Deputy rightly points out that the Dublin South-East area is among those areas where this increase is creating pressure for extra school places and this is being felt strongly in the short term. The Department has highlighted the Dublin South-East area as one that will need extra school places from 2014 onwards.

The Deputy will be aware that my Department uses a geographical information system to identify where the pressure for school places will arise. The GIS uses data from the Central Statistics Office, Ordnance Survey Ireland and the Department of Social Protection in addition to the Department's databases. The Department also uses data from local authorities.

With this information the Department carried out a study of the country to identify where there will be a requirement for significant additional school provision at primary and post-primary levels over the coming years. The Dublin South-East area surfaced as one needing extra school places under the process. In June 2011, I announced the need for the establishment of 20 new primary schools with approximately 500 pupils per school to cater for increased demographics in several locations up to and including 2017. This included the establishment of a new school for the Dublin South-East area. The school, known as the Shellybanks Educate Together national school, which will open this coming September, will be located initially in start-up accommodation in Ballsbridge. It will cater for demand for pupil places from the Sandymount, Ringsend and Irishtown areas. It is planned that the new school will provide an additional 16 mainstream classrooms for the area when it is fully developed, or more if extra capacity is needed. The Department is working on acquiring permanent accommodation for the school but this alone is not enough and additional capacity is being provided in other schools in the area as well.

A building project to facilitate the amalgamation and expansion of two schools is facilitated under the five year construction programme I announced in March 2012. The project is at an advanced stage of architectural planning and it will provide further classrooms for the Dublin South-East area when completed. The Department is also working closely with some of the other schools in the area to address enrolment issues in the shorter term, starting next

September. These schools include Canon O'Hanlon memorial school, otherwise known as Star of the Sea school in Sandymount, St. Brigid's primary school on Haddington Road, and Scoil Mhuire Lakelands on Gilford Road. I record my thanks to the schools for their help and support in this matter. In tandem, the Department is examining the most up-to-date demographic data available for the area to determine further needs and ensure these are met in a timely manner. The Department and I will continue to monitor the situation to ensure every pupil seeking a place in the area can have access to one.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the Minister and I welcome his reply. He represents the same constituency as me and therefore is fully aware of all the issues involved. I welcome the reforms the Minister is bringing to the schools admission process. They have been received well in general in the constituency and in the country, as has the advanced schools buildings programme. However, the Minister will have received the same correspondence I have been getting from parents who are thinking about deferring sending their children to school to September 2014. Some have moved to baptise their children in a matter of weeks simply to try to get them moved up the lists. Others have had to go to family members to try to help with moving to pay for private education because they cannot get into a local State school.

The Minister rightly identified some of the schools where there are problems, including St. Mary's national school on Belmont Avenue. Is there a possibility that we could have an extra classroom in the new Shellybanks Educate Together school for September 2014? Is there any possibility of using a site, for example, a site on Harcourt Terrace, that could be expanded on a temporary basis? Could property be leased? Furthermore, in terms of the possible solutions, to what extent are the schools and, through the school boards, the parents, being informed of all the efforts the Minister is making to try to resolve the situation? As each week moves on, parents become more frantic about it.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: I welcome the Deputy's comments and his recognition of what we are trying to do. Part of the problem is that the GIS registers the physical location of every child benefit payment for those aged one, two and three years of age. It works accurately and satisfactorily in certain areas, for example, outside a town like Clonakilty or Donegal town, where we have a fair idea what the growing population is and what the likelihood is of the numbers that will present in the nearest urban area. In a large urban area like Dublin, there are people who have moved to the suburbs. Some of these may have grown up in the inner city area and they may wish to bring their children back in to the city centre, which they are entitled to do, since the grandparents are providing support after school. Therefore, our ability to measure and capture the numbers of people looking for places in big urban areas, whether in Cork, Limerick, Galway or Dublin, is self-evidently less clear and less sophisticated than in different parts of the country where the growth in demand can only be accommodated in the area most likely to accommodate it and where people are unlikely to travel miles in another direction.

Notwithstanding that, the increase in the numbers has, to a certain extent, caught us by surprise and we are considering emergency measures to get extra accommodation. Deputy Murphy has referred to some of these. We have had one setback in respect the amalgamation of St. Brigid's and St. Mary's schools on Haddington Road. Planning permission and so on was secured in the normal way but then an appeal was lodged in the past working day, which is perfectly valid. People are perfectly entitled to so do. There are difficulties with traffic. We hope the appeals process can be expedited as quickly as possible. I thank the Deputy for bringing the matter to the attention of the House because it is an issue. I will communicate with him and other colleagues in the constituency.