

'Innovation and Excellence' ACCS Education Conference 2017

The annual ACCS Education Conference provides participants with an opportunity to focus on, reflect and discuss issues pertinent to teaching and learning in our schools. This year's Conference which took place in the Mullingar Park Hotel on Wednesday 10th May concentrated on the twinned themes of Innovation and Excellence. The focus of the day was very definitely on schools and teachers sharing innovative practices both on a whole school and individual classroom level. The theme of Innovation and Excellence was explored through two presentations which framed four concurrent workshops. In the workshops, examples of innovative practice were delivered by practicing teachers and school management from St. Mark's Community School, Tallaght; St. Colmcille's Community School, Knocklyon; Scoil Mhuire, Clane and Kinsale Community School.

Towards Excellence in our Schools

Mr. Harry Freeman, Education Consultant and Lecturer in Trinity College Dublin, set the tone for the Conference with his refreshing and thought provoking presentation which he titled 'Towards Excellence in our Schools'. His use of the word 'towards' in the title was deliberate and purposeful as he explained that all schools are on a continuum towards excellence, few have achieved the golden grail. He first of all challenged us to think about excellence by posing the questions, 'What does excellence look like, how do we define it and how do we set about achieving it?' In elaborating on this issue he highlighted the relevance of school context and the importance of 'buy in' by the stakeholders. He divided the topic into five inter-related themes which impact on the school's endeavour towards excellence:- Learning and Teaching, Leadership, Building Confidence, Resistance and Inclusivity.

Learning and Teaching

In this section Harry explored how schools improve learning in the school both from the perspective of the teacher and the student.



Mr. Pat McKenna, Honorary Secretary ACCS, Ms. Antoinette Nic Gearailt, President ACCS, Mr. Harry Freeman, Education Consultant and Lecturer in Trinity College Dublin, Ms. Eileen Salmon, General Secretary ACCS, Mr. John Irwin, Assistant General Secretary ACCS, at the recent ACCS Education Conference.

He highlighted the importance of creating a school climate conducive to learning and questioned how students feel about school, are their experiences positive or negative. When dealing with teaching strategies Harry provided a definition of differentiation which is both challenging and reassuring. In his opinion differentiation is a mind-set – do I, as teacher, know enough about each child to be able to tailor my thoughts and lessons to fit every child and meet their needs? Harry also questioned the impact of assessment on student learning and does the feedback we give inspire and motivate our students. He challenged us to look at better ways of doing homework – which must be differentiated – as in his opinion the concept of homework is shrouded in negativity so considers that calling it 'home learning' might create a different attitude. He welcomed the learning opportunities provided for by the new Junior Cycle and advised against wasting them.

Leadership

Having a vision for Learning and Teaching which will inspire others is central to Leadership. In using the phrase 'Learning and Teaching' he emphasised the importance of good

learning as opposed to good teaching. He advocated the establishment of a Learning and Teaching team in every school to improve learning and that every member of staff be thought of as a potential leader. It is very important to encourage dialogue among staff and to embed professional dialogue into every subject department meeting and staff meeting.

Building Confidence

These practices and activities in turn lead to confidence building where teachers lead discussions and contribute to department or staff meetings on a regular basis. Confidence grows where people are affirmed, where their voice is heard and they are empowered to try new ideas. A culture of CPD needs to be developed in schools so that teachers, principals and Boards of Management ask the question 'What kind of learning community are we?' In developing answers innovative practices can and will grow organically in the schools.

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Resistance

Because people develop in different ways and differing rates not everyone is at the same level of readiness. Some members of staff are confident, enjoy working with colleagues and are eager to try new things and embrace change. A large portion of staff – about 60 to 80 percent adopt a 'wait and see' approach in that they want to improve but are hesitant to change. A third group, comprising about 10 to 20 percent of staff are happy with the status quo and resist change and new initiatives. To overcome this resistance schools need a clearly articulated vision which is informed and supported by current research and current data. This forms the basis of building a positive culture where all views are respected but the naysayers are not allowed to block progress which aims to improve the learning experiences of all.

Inclusivity

The term 'inclusive school' is very much in vogue at present and Harry believes that everyone in the school has a right to be valued and have their voices heard. Relationships are key. Underpinning school relationships are three pillars:- a good code of behaviour, good referral structures and teachers taking responsibility for what happens in their classrooms. When properly knit together these pillars form and shape a happy school and a happy school is a learning school.

Harry summarised his message to Conference:- keep learning and teaching central to the mission, try to improve school culture and try to increase the number of smiles.

Concurrent Workshops

Homework Initiative

Delegates were given an opportunity to hear at first-hand how schools and teachers tackle innovation to improve learning. Ms. Sinead Ronan, Scoil Mhuire, Clane detailed her school's efforts to promote homework as a valuable learning tool as part of the TL21 project.



Mr. Padraig Nolan, Principal, Scoil Mhuire, Clane, introduces the workshop on a homework strategy at the recent ACCS Education Conference, presented by Ms. Sinead Ronan.

Initially, staff and 5th year students were surveyed. The results of the staff survey showed that a sizeable number of students were not doing homework to an acceptable standard. Interestingly, from a students' perspective the results showed that they wanted to spend less time doing homework and more time studying.

One of the initiatives put forward to address the quantity of homework was the introduction of a homework app (Schoolbag). The app tracks the amount of homework given each night to students and a maximum amount can be set so that a situation can't arise that a student has several hours of homework on a given night. The teacher inputs the prescribed homework and the time allotted and this can be accessed by parents and students. This both increases parental involvement in homework and introduces a level of flexibility. For 1st years they introduced a booklet 'Homework Matters' which is studied in SPHE class for the first 10 weeks of the school year. This reinforces good homework habits at the beginning of the school year and their life as post-primary students.

They adopted the Alfie Kohn motto 'It's better to give no homework to anyone than the same homework to everyone'. As a

result homework was differentiated, peer assessment was introduced and reflective practices were initiated to encourage students to think critically about their learning. For example, after the completion of an assignment a reflective worksheet is given so that students will think about their progress and encourage them to link prior learning.

Sinead reflected that homework was a much more complex issue than they thought at the beginning of the process. Accordingly, it has become a long term, whole school project involving staff, students and parents.

Strategies to Improve Problem-solving skills

Ms. Irene Stone, St. Mark's Community School presented her school's initiatives to improve problem-solving. They employed the OECD definition of 'problems are situations with no obvious solution, and solving problems requires thinking and learning in action'. They then adopted two strategies:- working collaboratively through an online environment and a weekly whole school puzzle competition. Polya's four step approach was adopted as follows:- identify and understand the problem, explain (in words) what it means, collaborate to carry out the plan, check your answers and reflect and if necessary try again. Research findings suggest that when using the 'Google Doc' platform students become more reflective and continue to try, they work collaboratively and use words to describe what they are doing and apply a multi-representational approach to problem-solving. One of the advantages of using 'Google Docs' is that it supports scaffolding by both teacher and other members of the group and it also introduces a level of competition and raises the level of expectation so that students push themselves to learn new things.

The weekly puzzle arose from a numeracy initiative. A new puzzle is presented each week and students can submit their solutions either on paper or



L-R: Ms. Eithne Coyne, Principal, St. Mark's Community School, Mr. Paul Thornton, ACCS Executive, chairs the workshop presented by Ms. Irene Stone, St. Mark's Community School, on problem-solving in Maths at the ACCS Education Conference.



Mr. John McKennedy, Principal, and Ms. Aileen Ryan, Deputy Principal, St. Colmcille's Community School, presenting on Academic Monitoring of Students, at the ACCS Education Conference.

by email. Not only do students have to solve the puzzle but they also have to describe how they got their answer. Students are free to enter or not, so there is no pressure on either students or teachers. Apart from the possibility of winning the weekly prize, students have become motivated and enthused by the competitions without realising fully that they are engaged in Maths problems.

Academic Monitoring of Students

Mr. John McKennedy, Principal, St. Colmcille's Community School, presented his school's initiative on tracking or monitoring students academically. Based on the 'CAT 4' results students are divided into bands. Students get three sets of tests per year – approximately every 10 weeks. As well as entering a grade, each teacher assigns a letter, E, S, C to the grade. 'E' represents excellent, 'S' is satisfactory and 'C' is cause for concern. At a glance, students who are not reaching their potential are easily identified. Comments are also differentiated for each student so that their performance is assessed and commented on. In this way a student's performance as against his/her ability is measured and tracked from 1st year onwards and appropriate interventions put in place.

Feilte Beaga

Ms. Leona Forde, Kinsale Community School presented 'Feilte Beaga' which was inspired by Feilte organised by the Teaching Council. Feilte Beaga is an annual event and is an example of teachers sharing knowledge and collaborating among themselves. Teachers are invited to make a presentation for 15/20 minutes. So far teachers have presented on Questioning, Mind Maps, Challenging Gifted Students, Reflective Practice, Social Media/ICT in Teaching and Learning, Cross Curricular Links and Droichead.

The school has also introduced Teachmeet – an informal meeting of teachers once per term – where they

come together to exchange and share ideas. The school has also opened a Facebook 'Teaching and Learning' page which links into the school management system so that they can post interesting articles.

Plans are already underway for next year when they hope to tackle the pillars of Teaching and Learning, namely Feedback, Questioning and Self-Directed Learning.

A common theme running through all the workshops was the need to collect and analyse data. What's working well, to what extent are Teaching and Learning strategies discussed at subject department meetings? A second strong theme is the need for collaboration as, without it, our growth is limited to ourselves.

Building Excellence into the Culture of Schools

For the final session Mr. Séamus Ó Ceallacháin, Principal, Pobalscoil na Tríonóide, Youghal, presented a veritable *tour de force* of his school's journey from amalgamation in 2006 to where the school is positioned at present. Séamus recounted in detail the pivotal steps taken on their journey. Once the school was established and operational structures put in place, they formed a task group to



Ms. Leona Forde, Kinsale Community School, presents a workshop on Feilte Beaga and promoting teacher professional collaboration at the recent ACCS Education Conference.

articulate a mission statement for the school. They posed three key questions: What kind of a school do we want to be? What really matters in this school? What evidence is there that this is what we do? This was their springboard in formulating their mission statement. Séamus describes their mission statement as a 'Google Map' that informs and gives direction to all their activities. In 2009 the school had a WSE. Feedback was extremely positive but with one caveat. They were advised to analyse the Leaving Cert results in some of the core subjects. This provided the basis for the establishment of strong subject departments. Maths teachers set the ball rolling and their work was soon replicated by other departments. Whilst the aim was to establish a culture of evaluating results it soon spread into other practices and activities, e.g. peer observation, team teaching and sharing best practice.

In furthering their mission – to be a beacon school – they used both formal and informal models of school improvement. Many improvements did not arise from a formal review but from an informal comment or suggestion by a parent or teacher that triggered an idea. Examples of this include the 1st year taster options, mixed ability, the introduction of Spanish as an additional foreign language. Once Spanish was introduced as an option the up-take of languages increased to approximately 85%.

A novel approach was taken to the organisation of meetings so as to eliminate unnecessary meetings. Following in-service they introduced a system that meetings would not take place unless there were three meetings involved:- a pre-meeting to decide if there was a relevant, worthwhile agenda, the actual meeting and a post evaluation meeting of the chairperson and secretary to follow up on decisions taken. In this way a focus on productive, targeted meetings and agendas was instilled into the culture of the school. If there are no suggested items for the agenda then there



Mr. Séamus Ó Ceallacháin, Principal, Pobalscoil na Tríonóide, addresses delegates at the ACCS Education Conference on the theme of Building Excellence into the Culture of our Schools.



Delegates participate in the open forum at the ACCS Education Conference.

is no meeting. As a result staff meetings became more relevant and purposeful as agenda items are focused, contained and time bound. Previously staff meetings were mainly used to disseminate information. Now they are used to address issues regarding the organisation of learning and teaching, e.g. the use of ICT, Instructional Leadership, Praise Project, Sharing Best Practice and Review and Improvement. In so far as possible teachers chair and manage the meetings in order to foster teacher leadership.

The school adopted 'Kaizan' – the Japanese philosophy of improvement – that even if you're winning you cannot remain static. As a result they introduced other initiatives such as the Careers Evening, in-school Sci-Fest competition, twitter accounts for each department, a focus on student identity and wellbeing in a large school, the Homework club for 70-80 1st and 2nd years and the establishment of the Reading Room as part of the Literacy Strategy. Reflection, evaluation, planning, growth and development across all aspects of the school are cyclical.

As a result of their initiatives the percentage of students progressing to third level has increased year on year and the school has now set themselves the target that by 2021 all students (100% of their student population) will aspire to third level. Séamus attributed his school's

successful journey to building a culture of trust where teachers are empowered to be leaders, where there is shared ownership of the mission of the school, where there is effective communication in a spirit of trust and partnership and where there is delegation with accountability.

Conclusion

The ACCS Education Conference mirrored and reflected the revolution in learning and teaching that is taking place in our schools. During the course of her presentation Leona Forde quoted from Fullan and Hargreaves **'Professional Capital,**

Transforming Teaching in Every School' on the significance of teacher collaboration *'where teachers set aside time for planning together, teaching together and talking together. Peer observation and consultation contribute to a shared professional culture where risks are encouraged, mistakes acknowledged, learning scrutinised and secrets shared.'*

That philosophy and practice was central to and clearly manifest in all the presentations. It was very much in evidence that while the student is placed at the centre of the learning process there was a clear emphasis on both student and teacher learning. All presenters exemplify what Fullan and Hargreaves describe as the 'reforming teacher' whose craft is to pose problems and seek solutions, to create knowledge and use it. They advocate that 'systematic inquiry, research and reflection are at the core of the teacher's work. Like their students, teachers are involved in a process of continuous learning and improvement'

Sincere thanks to all our presenters and schools, the ACCS Education Subcommittee and chairperson, Mr. Paul Crone, Principal, Old Bawn Community School, for a most refreshing, inspiring and stimulating Conference.

Ár mbuíochoas dóibh go léir.



Delegates enjoy a break in the glorious sunshine at the ACCS Education Conference in the Mullingar Park Hotel.

Recent relevant DES Circular Letters

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| 0040/2017 | Revised Rates of Travelling and Subsistence Allowances for Boards of Management of Community and Comprehensive Schools |
| 0041/2017 | Supervision and Substitution Scheme – Opt-out and Opt-in |
| 0042/2017 | Recruitment of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) – Supplementary Assignment Arrangements for the 2017/18 school year |

For a complete list of relevant DES Circulars please refer to the ACCS website, www.accs.ie, and follow the DES tab → Relevant DES Circulars.

News and Events in our Schools

All-Ireland U17½ Community & Comprehensive Schools, Br. Denis Minehane, Hurling Cup Final 2017



The victorious Castlecomer Community School team with mentors Mr. Peter O'Donovan and Mr. Pat Tynan following the presentation of the Br. Denis Minehane Cup in Nowlan Park.

Final Score:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| Castlecomer Community School | 0 - 19 |
| Blackwater Community School | 1 - 12 |

Castlecomer Community School secured the ACCS All-Ireland U17½ Community & Comprehensive Schools, Br. Denis Minehane Cup for the second year running. They defeated Blackwater Community School in a pulsating game of hurling in Nowlan Park, Kilkenny. With the aid of the wind Castlecomer Community School led by a single point at half time on a score line 0 - 11 to 0 - 10. The second half produced some excellent hurling from both teams with Castlecomer producing a strong final ten minutes securing a victory based on a complete team performance.

Castlerea Community School secure their third All-Ireland Basketball crown for 2017



The Castlerea Community School U15 girls basketball team with mentors Mr. Joe Henry and Mr. Thomas Callaghan following victory in the All-Ireland Cup Final.

On 8th May 2017 the Castlerea Community School girls U15 basketball team, coached by Mr. Joe Henry and Mr. Thomas Callaghan, defeated Causeway Comprehensive, Kerry to secure All-Ireland honours. In a notable year, this is the third All-Ireland basketball title to travel west to Castlerea Community School in 2017.

News and Events in our Schools

John the Baptist Community School, Hospital, Co. Limerick Five All-Ireland Titles in 2017



John the Baptist Community School 'The Drive for Five' captains pictured with Mr. Colin Bergin, Deputy Principal, Ms. Noreen Rafferty, Deputy Principal and Ms. Mary Jones, Principal.

John the Baptist Community School has witnessed unprecedented sporting success and history being made over the past number of weeks. What had become known as 'The Drive for Five' became a reality when the Junior Ladies Football Team completed the years success winning their All-Ireland title. The victory brought the total historic number of All-Ireland Titles for John the Baptist Community School in 2017 to five.

Altogether the School has won:

1. All-Ireland Senior Ladies A Football
2. All-Ireland Junior Ladies A Football
3. All-Ireland Senior B Hurling
4. All-Ireland Senior D Camogie
5. All-Ireland Junior D Camogie

Congratulations to all the players and team mentors involved. The pride and joy experienced by all involved has seen the students grow in confidence. They are walking taller and have constant smiles on their faces.

Retirement of Ms. Bridie Mulligan, Moyne Community School

A key figure in the history and development of Moyne Community School has completed a record forty-four years of service to the school and Board of Management. On April 7th, 2017 Bridie (Brady) Mulligan retired from her position as school secretary. Such was her intimate knowledge of the system and of Department regulations, and her close professional relationship with pupils and staff that it has been rightly said she could run the school on her own!

Of the thousands of students who have passed through Moyne, it is fairly safe to say that she knows or remembers every one of them. They recall her as a friend who could advise or guide at critical moments in their lives. She will be missed for her ready wit, her efficiency, her ability, her integrity and the other personal qualities which rendered her a legend over the years and an almost indispensable figure, not only today, but contributing immensely to the growth of Moyne Community School as a modern educational power house.



Ms. Bridie Mulligan at a recent school assembly to mark her retirement following forty-four years of dedicated service to Moyne Community School.