

Speech by

Jan O'Sullivan, T.D.

Minister for Education and Skills

at the

Start Strong Conference

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Introduction / Importance of Early Years

Thanks to Ciairín for the invitation to be here with you today.

This is the first opportunity I have had as Minister for Education and Skills to address a conference focussed on the early years.

And so I really have been looking forward to it.

There is something particularly special about working with children in their early years.

Working with them as they play and explore the world around them is a great privilege.

And watching as they learn from that play and exploration teaches us a lot about human development.

As most of you will know, I trained in the Montessori method when my own children were very small, and ran my own pre-school for a number of years.

And so I know how much pleasure you get from early years care and education.

And I also know how hard you need to work to ensure that these earliest years are happy and playful, and also that children have the opportunity to really learn.

As someone who has worked with very young children, I know how critical investment in these early years can be.

But we all know that the necessary investment has not been made over recent decades.

I have about 16 months left as Minister for Education and Skills – the next election will be called in March 2016.

I believe this is enough time to make a difference.

But not to fix every problem that exists across the education sector.

As Minister, there are two areas I want to place a particular focus on – increasing investment in education, and putting early years at the heart of the education system.

Investment in Education

My first priority is to achieve greater investment in education, including in the early years.

In the last budget I started that work, delivering the first increase in education spending in recent years.

That increase was modest – a €60m increase over 2014 spending.

But it has allowed us to bring reductions in education spending to a halt.

It has allowed us to provide the teachers and funding necessary to support the growth in student numbers in our schools.

And it has also allowed us to fund reforms that will improve the quality of the education our children receive – reforms such as the literacy and numeracy strategy, reform of the junior cycle, and the introduction of education-focussed early years inspections.

As our economy continues to recover, the proceeds of that recovery must be used to repair and rebuild our society.

I believe passionately in the value of education.

There is no other job I would rather have in politics than the one I have been given.

I believe that, more than any other area, education can help us to build a better society.

Start Strong, and others in the early years sector, have repeatedly argued that greater public investment is required.

I want to tell you clearly today that I agree with that.

I want to work with James Reilly, and with all of you, to identify how such investment can best be targeted to improve the quality and quantity of early years education provided to our children.

Delivering such investment will require shifting public opinion, so that the importance of investment in early years is recognised by all.

Increasing the importance and quality of the early years sector

As Minister, I am determined to put the early years at the heart of our education system.

Already, the embracing of play and exploration that happens in early years settings, has begun to inform teaching and learning in our primary schools.

Implementation of Aistear and Síolta in both early years and primary schools is really needed, to keep play central to the learning experiences of our small children.

But that cannot happen without support.

My Department, and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs have to work closely on this.

One area where we have done that already is through the creation of Better Start, the new national early years quality support service.

I'm really pleased that Margaret Rogers is here today to speak to you about Better Start.

This is a model that has worked very well in the school system, where support services have underpinned innovation and improvements in quality for many years.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is currently developing a Practice Guide that will distil key principles from Aistear and Síolta.

That guide will be available to support the Better Start service in engaging with early years providers.

As you are aware, we are also in the process of introducing education focussed pre-school inspections for the first time.

The Department of Children have provided the funding for dedicated early years inspectors, who will be employed alongside our school inspectors.

I know that Gary Ó Donnachadha has already outlined details of this for you, and I don't want to repeat what he has said.

Except to give you two assurances.

Firstly, these inspections will complement, and not duplicate, the inspections carried out by TÚSLA.

And secondly, the inspections will be developed in close collaboration and consultation with the early years sector.

We will make every effort to ensure that we don't create unnecessary administrative burdens for our early years settings.

And we will work to make sure that these inspections will help to support improvement in the sector.

Since my appointment as Minister, there are two other announcements I have made in relation to early years that I would like to provide you with more detail on today.

Firstly, we are going to carry out the first major review of education and training programmes that lead to qualifications in early years care and education.

I will be launching the consultation process for this review in January, and am very keen to ensure that the views of all stakeholders inform this review.

As part of the review, the views of anyone with an interest in early years education will be sought.

As well as carrying out a general consultation, we will carry out specific surveys of education institutions delivering programmes, early years practitioners who hold these qualifications, and employers of early years practitioners.

This review will help to ensure that early years qualifications provide our graduates with the knowledge, skills and dispositions that have been identified, through the CoRe report and elsewhere, as being central to supporting quality educational outcomes for all children in all early years settings.

I have also announced that I will create an Advisory Group on Early Years Education issues.

This afternoon, I will be publishing the full list of organisations who are being invited to nominate members to this advisory group, which will report to me twice a year.

I will also be publishing the terms of reference for that group.

I have sought to ensure that all major organisations, including Start Strong, Early Childhood Ireland, and Barnardos, are included in that group.

I also recognise the importance of associations and unions representing those working in the sector, and so ACP, INTO and IMPACT will also be represented.

It will never be possible to include every organisation or individual with an interest in this area, but I intend that the group will regularly organise plenary sessions through which a much broader range of voices can be heard.

Conclusion

It has been a genuine pleasure to join you for your conference here today.

I hope my comments here today have shown you that I have a genuine passion for improving early years education, and a commitment to working with all stakeholders in the sector to delivering better funded, better quality early years care and education for all of our young children.

Thank you.