



EDUCATION: THE FOUNDATION OF ECONOMIC SUCCESS (PART II)

As far back as June 2006 in Opinion Piece 9 I wrote about why I believe education is such an important part of our future economic success. At the time I did not have any children in the education system and therefore I had not experienced the reality of what was involved. Now over eight years later I have two children in National school and a third due to start next September so I can now write about our experience to date as well as sharing some thoughts on the future.

As I am writing this just before Christmas I am delighted that in this season of goodwill to all men I can report that I have nothing but positive goodwill to share with the primary school teaching profession and I intend to use this opinion piece as an opportunity to lavish them with praise (I will however make one small criticism of secondary teachers).

It is a fantastic thing to be able to say that my children look forward to going to school and are horrified at the thought of missing a day.

From the Principal down to the Caretaker there really seems to be a culture of being part of a community where education is given the priority it deserves.

There is an active parents' council (although the majority of parents do not get involved) and a board of management that appears to work well.

I know this is only one school and it may be exceptionally good but if the others are even half as good well then we have a pretty good system.

In my original opinion piece I expressed my concern about class size and it is an issue in the school. There are thirty children in my eldest son's class and I do worry about whether the weaker students get enough individual attention but I do get a sense that the teachers have done a good job of trying to help children of all abilities.

Even with class sizes of thirty pupils the teachers have managed to go beyond the core subjects and work on developing other skills like science, gardening, debating, drama, music as well as sport. (I presume it is very difficult to start teaching entrepreneurialism at this age because every country needs entrepreneurs!)

Since I wrote the original opinion piece I think I have heard about research that supports the idea that well motivated teachers with ability are more important than class size in determining positive outcomes and my own experience so far supports this proposition. I therefore have to accept that my original opinion piece may have put too much emphasis on class size and not enough emphasis on how to make sure that teaching remains an attractive profession for future generations.

With regard to how we make sure teaching remains an attractive profession I would guess that one of the greatest challenges is making sure that teachers are paid enough to be able to afford to live in the expensive property locations (particularly the major cities like Dublin). It might require a "city allowance" and this may create all sorts of problems for the teachers unions and the government but we have to make sure that children in the cities and particularly in deprived urban areas are given the opportunity to have a decent education. I would love to think of a better solution, one that doesn't cost taxpayers a fortune, there might be one out there but I haven't heard of it yet.

So repeating myself I have to say that the overall experience so far has been positive but with the eldest due to start secondary school in September 2016 I find myself worried about the potentially difficult situation that appears to be facing some parents in managing the transition from National to Secondary school. I am referring to the possibility that there will be a

shortage of places in some of the local schools, the schools that are seen as more academic, with the system trying to cope by having sufficient places in schools with a greater vocational emphasis.

The two nearby vocational schools do not offer applied maths as a subject and I would assume that if we want to grow our science and engineering capabilities in this age of the “knowledge” economy we should at least make sure that there are sufficient places in schools that do offer this subject. Maybe I’m being too optimistic hoping that there are lots of students with the aptitude and desire to do applied maths but if we don’t provide places in the schools where it is taught well we will never know.

I presume that the Department of Education would argue that they just do not have the money to build and staff extra capacity at these “academic” schools and I also presume that all the government politicians would say exactly the same but the strange thing is that one of the local schools has got the go ahead to build a new school on the existing site but due to the constraints of the site they claim that they will not be in a position to offer more places. In a town like Wexford I just find this particularly infuriating. If there isn’t room on the existing site move to a new site. (I guess that having Minister Brendan Howlin as a former pupil of this school has helped in getting the go ahead to build the new school!)

I should also point out that having said everything I have said above I find myself in a situation where my son is highly likely to get a place in a school that offers applied maths because it happens to be the school that I went to myself. My old school discriminates positively in favour of sons of past pupils so it looks like my son will not suffer due to this shortage of places.

Just because I’m alright does not mean that I’m not prepared to point out this potentially bad situation. I feel really sorry for the people that have moved into the area from other parts of the world. I had a conversation with one parent, a New Zealander, an engineer married to a teacher from Dublin and I could sense his anger at the possibility that his son might find it difficult to get a place. He might lead the march on Leinster House if his son doesn’t get the opportunity to get into a school that provides the broadest range of academic subjects!

Continuing on the theme of secondary schools I also want to mention my surprise at the recent strike action undertaken by secondary teachers. They held a one day strike to protest against plans to introduce a system that places greater emphasis on continuous assessment for the Junior Certificate. I watched a television programme in which Dr Ed Walsh debated the issue with a leader of one of the unions. Dr Walsh made the point that nearly all countries in Europe now use a continuous assessment system and in his opinion the evidence seemed to support the idea that this is a good idea. I was really disappointed with the union leader’s response. He did not explain why most other European countries can make it work but why he believes it is a bad idea for us.

The unions have announced that they are going to have further strikes to prevent continuous assessment and to be honest I am really struggling to understand why they are prepared to disrupt so many families over this issue.

In my original opinion piece in my concluding remark I made the observation that a good education system would be necessary to “*ensure that the Celtic Tiger lives on*”. Little did I realise at the time that the Celtic Tiger was just a couple of years away from death and a situation where most of our well educated young people were going to be forced to emigrate. When I wrote that piece I had not realised that too many of our educated young people had ended up in property speculation/development, architecture, estate agencies, flying helicopters and other assorted professions linked to the boom rather than in skills that would produce products or services that could be sold internationally.

In the last few years those young educated people have only been able to find jobs in companies not connected to the domestic economy (like Google and Facebook). The skills in demand have been software, technology and accounting. This has resulted in a situation where this opinion piece is being written at a time when economic growth and job creation has reached mini “Tiger” economy levels and there is real hope that this will be sustained. I just hope however that we have learnt from our past mistakes. I do not desire to see the return of a property led tiger, rather I want to see a Celtic Oak: sturdy and strong that can last for generations. (I know a Celtic “Oak” is highly unlikely and economic cycles will most likely remain the norm but if we want to avoid boom and bust on the recent scale we need to produce a generation of entrepreneurs that export goods and services rather than relying on the domestic economy).

In conclusion I just want to say that no matter what label we use to describe the economy I just believe that education will be an essential part of any success we achieve and if the teachers in our local school are in any way representative of teachers in general well then there is hope for the future.