

Dáil Éireann - Volume 634 - 21 March, 2007

Pupil-Teacher Ratio: Motion (Resumed).

Mr. J. Breen: In tabling her amendment to the motion, the Minister, Deputy Hanafin, showed her ignorance of the national class size crisis. Once again, she has displayed the Government's ineptitude in trying to tackle the problem.

In its programme for Government in 2002 the Administration did not state some or most children under nine years would be in classes of fewer than 20 pupils. Rather it stated all would be in such classes. The truth has been starkly different. The Minister has failed the children and parents of this country. In County Clare the average class size in primary schools is 27. Last May some 6,500 people signed a petition to force the Minister to act. However, she has done absolutely nothing and failed once again.

In Scoil Maighdine Mhuire in Newmarket-on-Fergus the principal has divided fourth class in two owing to pupil numbers but cannot secure extra accommodation. St. Mochulla's national school in Tulla has over 30 students in some classes and those numbers will increase with the enrolment of new pupils. The school in Sixmilebridge is fighting an ongoing battle with the Department to secure extra teachers and prefab accommodation. Every possible obstacle has been put in its way. The Educate Together school on the Gort Road in Ennis is severely overcrowded and has a network of prefabs and Portakabins for accommodation. It relies on a domestic sanitation system for its sewerage requirements.

Last month I visited St. Clare's, a special needs school in Ennis. The principal expressed exasperation at the way in which Ministers dealt with special needs education. The Minister boasts of the structures she has put in place, but what are they? The special educational needs officer in the area told the principal that a resource teacher could be divided between two classes. By God, she is a mighty woman.

The Minister runs around patting herself on the back at every opportunity. This month I issued a press release as one of nine Independent Deputies making a commitment to reduce average class sizes by one pupil each year for the next five years. We do not believe in grandiose public announcements followed by the pathetic inaction that has been a feature of the Government's term of office. We have made a realistic and achievable promise on which we will deliver.

There is a severe shortage of primary school staff at a time when qualified teachers frequently seek my help in finding full-time employment. The Minister tells us how many teachers are now in posts, but, with the rest of the Government, she has failed the children and teachers of Ireland. The Government has failed the people and the sooner it is run out of office the better. We cannot have our children in big classes in which teachers can only devote two or three minutes a day to each one. That is not on and has to stop.