

Physical Education Facilities

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. My request to the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, is that she lead a new scheme to provide gymnasiums for existing schools which do not have them and that it be a cross-departmental scheme involving Departments such as the Departments of Children and Youth Affairs, Health and Transport, Tourism and Sport which all have a stake in children's lives in terms of their health and well-being. This is not existing policy, but it would be a very smart policy. I have experience of this in Galway. I refer to three schools in Galway city, Salerno secondary school in Salthill and the Mercy and Presentation secondary schools which it is proposed to amalgamate. Salerno secondary school has no gym, but it has raised money to contribute to the cost of one. It is begging for a new proposal from the Minister to help it to provide a gym for the 600 girls in the school. A couple of weeks ago I tabled a Commencement Matter which was taken by the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, about the proposed amalgamation of the Mercy and the Presentation secondary schools. The site chosen by CEIST is the site of the Presentation secondary school which has no gym. However, the school which will be vacated does have one. When I asked the Minister of State whether there would be a new gym following the amalgamation, his answer was that the schools could use the proceeds of the sale of the Mercy secondary school site to fund one.

I need not tell the Minister of State about the evidence in favour of physical education and physical exercise. We know that we are facing a time bomb when it comes to obesity. Long before this time bomb emerged, there was much evidence showing that girls' interest in physical exercise decreased at second level unless it was made more interesting and appropriate to their needs. For the Government not to invest in the health and well-being of young girls is appalling and a missed opportunity. We are only storing up problems for the future. We must instil good lifestyle habits early. There is strong evidence in favour of this approach which I will not go into now.

The second issue is equity. I understand the pressing need for new accommodation and accept that all new schools have a gym, which is phenomenal. However, where is the equity for existing schools? The parents of children attending Salerno second school pay their taxes, as do the parents of children attending the Mercy and Presentation secondary schools. On that basis they should receive equity with equal access to facilities. I, therefore, request that the Minister for Education and Skills lead a scheme involving the Departments of Health, Children and Youth Affairs and Transport, Tourism and Sport and perhaps the Department of Justice and Equality. It should not be impossible to do this; it is not mind-blowing. We need a new policy in order that the children concerned can have equity. I understand that in terms of the finances the community must give a figure of 20% or 40%, but the principle that existing schools which do not have a gym will not have one provided is fundamentally wrong. I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's reply.

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Kevin Humphreys): I am taking this Commencement Matter on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan. I thank the Senator for raising it, as it provides me with an opportunity to clarify the current position on the provision of physical education facilities in post-primary schools.

The Department of Education and Skills fully recognises the key role of physical exercise within the school environment and continues to respond to the need to improve physical education facilities for all pupils attending schools within the constraints of the available funding. I also advise the Senator that the physical education curriculum has been designed on the basis that facilities in schools may vary. For example, many primary schools have a general purpose room, while almost all schools have outdoor play areas which are used to teach different aspects of the physical education programme. There is a similar situation at second level in the case of sports halls and outdoor facilities. In addition, many schools use adjacent local facilities, including public parks, playing fields and swimming pools. The provision of play space where site conditions and circumstances allow is one of the issues considered in the architectural design of new schools and major extensions. The Department's design guidelines for schools include guidance on the provision of physical education halls, general purpose rooms and outdoor hard play areas such as basketball courts.

The Senator will appreciate that in assessing applications from schools for funding for physical education hall facilities the Department needs to balance such requests in priority terms against the critical need to provide essential classroom accommodation, particularly in areas of demographic growth. In view of the constraints on available funding imposed by the need to provide such accommodation, the Department is not in a position at this time to consider an initiative as proposed by the Senator.

[Deputy Kevin Humphreys:] However, I wish to advise her that the number of schools with general purpose rooms and physical education halls is increasing all the time, while practically all schools have outside exercise space such as basketball and tennis courts and playing fields. In addition, many schools use adjacent local facilities, including public parks, playing fields and swimming pools.

The facilities that schools have on site are just part of the picture because they may also have access to excellent local sports facilities, which have been greatly expanded and improved through funding from the Government's sports capital programme in recent years. In that regard, the Department has liaised with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport on school applications for sporting facilities and with local authorities on shared school and community facilities where this is possible to achieve. The value of a cross-departmental approach in enhancing the contribution made by physical exercise in the promotion of healthy lifestyles has long been recognised by the Department.

In that regard, the Department is currently finalising guidance about measures to promote healthy lifestyles in consultation with the Department of Health and the HSE. This guidance will encompass measures to promote healthy eating, healthy vending and the promotion of physical education and physical activity. This guidance will be targeted in the first instance at post-primary schools and similar guidance will issue subsequently to primary schools. The Department is also participating in the cross-departmental group that is responsible for developing the national physical activity plan. This group, which is co-chaired by the Department of Health and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, is currently finalising a national plan containing a range of measures to promote physical activity across society, including in the education sector.

In view of the current interdepartmental co-operation on the development of healthy lifestyles, including physical education, the Minister does not propose to progress an interdepartmental scheme as proposed by the Senator. I thank her for allowing me the opportunity to clarify the current position in relation to physical education facilities in post-primary schools.

The Senator made a point on young women in secondary school which hit home for me given on my own experience in this area. I served on VECs and education and training boards for more than ten years. During that period I read numerous reports which outlined stark decreases in participation rates among this cohort, even where excellent facilities were available. The decrease was most noticeable after first year in secondary school but the numbers dropped constantly despite efforts to promote physical activities. While programmes worked for a short period, the fall off would subsequently recur. We tend to focus on young men and women who are very interested in sports or have individual qualities that allow their skills to be developed but the problems often arise in the group that does not join anything. This issue requires further investigation by the Departments of Health and Education and Science. I will relay the Senator's comments to the Minister, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, when I speak to her this afternoon or early tomorrow.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: I thank the Minister of State who is always generous with his comments. However, his official reply is very disappointing. He indicated that a cross-departmental approach is being taken in the discussions. I want the Minister for Education and Skills or the Minister for Transport, Sport and Tourism to offer leadership in developing the appropriate infrastructure. That may involve local negotiations with a view to schools sharing facilities. We cannot leave 1,000 or more girls in Galway city without a gym. The solution should involve consulting girls at second level to find out what they are interested in doing because if the right space and environment is not available to them, they will probably not participate at all. I hope the Minister of State will relay my comments to the Minister, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, although many Ministers make that commitment but do not do so.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: The Senator is referring to a specific school.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: Two.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I was speaking about general policy across the area.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: It is not a general policy issue.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: If the Senator will let me finish, I am aware of local negotiations across the country where co-operation between the Department of Education and Skills and the local

authorities have led to the development of good sporting facilities, including gymnasium halls and swimming pools, that the entire community can use. As a public representative, I have long been concerned about excellent facilities being locked up during school holidays or weekends. We have to examine the resources available to us. A community audit would be worthwhile in this regard to identify the facilities available and ensure their use is maximised. We are operating under financial constraints and we have to utilise whatever facilities are available rather than see them closed at weekends or at 4 p.m. every day. There is a need for basic co-operation but this can be achieved quite quickly by true leadership in local communities.