County Tipperary Joint Libraries Committee (Tipperary Libraries)

County Library, Castle Ave, Thurles, Co. Tipperary.

Response to “Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People” A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools. Nov. 2010 (Dept. of Education and Skills)

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This Draft Plan is a very welcome acknowledgement of the problems facing our education system and indeed society in general in the area of children’s literacy and numeracy. From a Public Libraries point of view the Plan hits the right note in recognising the importance of family literacy and the need for continuity of literacy supports. However, it is very disappointing to see such little integrated and cross-departmental consideration. Despite an acknowledgement in several sections of the Draft Plan of the importance of reading at home and reading for leisure outside of school, public libraries are mentioned just once, and then only in an oblique way. In all communities, especially in these times when parents cannot afford the cost of providing a constant variety of quality reading material, the local library should be a family’s literacy lifeline. In that regard, it is disappointing that the Plan does not integrate the public library service into the strategy, presenting an imperative for schools and library services to work together.

The need to develop a culture of reading in our communities is a highlight issue in this plan. Tipperary Libraries support this view but feel that the plan fails to acknowledge the existence of the hugely significant resource that is the public library which could be harnessed very effectively to meet this aim. If we are seriously committed to promoting a culture of reading in Irish society, then the public library should be integral to any plan aimed at addressing literacy issues. Many public libraries including our own service here in Co. Tipperary operate a Schools Library service where teachers can access a wide variety of reading and resource material for their pupils. In addition we operate a Schools Mobile library service which visits rural primary schools on a regular basis. Unfortunately, this aspect of our service has had to be reduced in the last year or so due to the withdrawal of financial support from the Dept. of Education and Skills. While the national budget for this grant scheme was a mere €2.1m, it had a tremendously positive impact on the range and quality of bookstock which we were able to offer to teachers. The reinstatement of this grant should be seen as a starting point in our attempt to tackle this problem. Indeed, over the past year many schools have expressed disappointment at the curtailment of the School Library service.

Apart from our direct involvement with schools we routinely run Reading Programmes, Children and Teens Bookclubs, Storytime for young children, Author visits, Quizzes etc. in an attempt to develop good reading habits among children and to inform parents and teachers of the wealth of reading material and other services available in public libraries. In general, these are hugely successful but we often find it a struggle to gain commitment from schools, and while teachers are always interested and supportive of our ideas and programmes, the effort and costs tend to be unilateral which leads to difficulties in maintaining them or capitalising on the momentum gained by these programmes. This is not to say that librarians are unaware of the many constraints facing teachers and school management in meeting the educational needs of children, but the reality is that the curriculum and school timetables must allow for such activities and programmes if we are to have any chance of meeting this problem head-on. Visits to
libraries, children and parents involvement in non school-based reading and learning projects should be promoted by schools, and special emphasis should be placed on the promotion of reading for leisure. We are delighted to say that over 13,000 pupils took part in planned School visits to public libraries in Co. Tipperary in 2010, and while this is quite modest in terms of the potential that could be achieved, nevertheless it shows that there is a willingness on the part of school management and teachers to exploit the resources of our libraries for the good of their pupils. Where schools cannot get local or convenient access to libraries, teachers should liaise with the public library Schools Librarian and work out a plan for accessing the Schools Mobile library service. The resources and expertise are there at both School and Library level, but formal processes need to be put in place so that they are used to the best benefit of the child, the family and the community. It is vitally important too that Libraries develop programmes specifically tailored to develop and maintain good reading habits among children during school holiday periods and especially during the summer period when momentum can be lost and where, in particular, children who struggle to keep up are very prone to fall even further behind. This is why programmes such as the Summer Reading Tree which we operate here in Tipperary are so very important. The following note very clearly shows what an impact this programme had on one particular mother and her children:

"As a parent I would like to endorse the Reading Tree as a great summer activity. .... the kids love to see their names on a leaf hanging on the tree. An added bonus is that I found my kids continued to read throughout the year. After participating in the Reading Tree, one of my children jumped two reading levels when school resumed last September" Clonmel Library user - Karen Coyle.

In conclusion, it is vital that we develop an integrated approach that will ensure there are strong links between schools, the public library service and the community at large in the development of child literacy, and in the provision of supports for children with literacy problems. This will only become possible when there is clear integration and understanding between the Dept. of Education and Skills, the Dept. of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and other agencies charged with the delivery of literacy policies for children. Individually, our best efforts will achieve little, as has been proven over the last two decades. Together, and working to agreed and set guidelines, Govt. Departments, teachers, librarians, parents and others working in this area can put an end to literacy problems among children in this country.

Yours sincerely

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Co. Librarian & Secretary

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