Vocational Schools – Seventy Years On!

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As I take my leave after thirty-five years teaching in Lough Allen College, Drumkeerin, I feel compelled to acknowledge the huge contribution Vocational Schools have made to the educational, social, cultural and economic development of rural communities.

Seventy years ago the Vocational Education Act heralded a new dawn in the dark and depressed Ireland of the 1930's. It opened windows of opportunity and enlightenment for hundreds of thousands of young boys and girls who until then could never progress further than National School education. Only the privileged few could afford to go into Secondary Schools. The numbers were very few indeed!

Where Vocational Schools were sited they rejuvenated the rural community. For not only did they provide educational opportunities for the youth of their area, they also opened their doors to adults who enthusiastically grasped the facilities to attend night classes, learning skills in woodwork, horticulture and gardening, cookery, needlework and crafts. The schools also became centres for social and cultural activities. Around them grew 'Muintír na Tíre', 'Macra na Tuaithe', I.C.A., 'Conradh na Gaeilge', Irish music, dancing and drama.

The V.E.C. System encouraged the integration of the school into the community. The community in return blossomed and grew into the Vocational School.

Drumkeerin Vocational School was one of such schools. The new school opened its doors to students in September 1935. Soon it became the focal point of the region. Its principal, Séamus Duignan, was a man imbued with a great love and pride for Irish culture, Irish music, Irish language and Irish dancing. He had also a great feeling for the community in which he lived. The school developed under his dedicated leadership. He was principal until his untimely death in 1966.

Those first 31 years were most difficult for Vocational Education. There was great poverty. The Economic War lasted from 1934 to 1938. The dark shadow of World War Two hung over Ireland from 1939 well past 1945 and into the 1950's. Ireland of the 1950's was depressed and stagnant economically and socially. Emigration was rampant; it was difficult to keep the school going. Children were kept at home to work on the farm, or to earn a few shillings to keep the family surviving. Many children had emigrated by the age of sixteen. The C.C.O., Principal and local V.E.C. members had frequently to cycle over long distances to canvass and encourage students to enrol. The school survived thanks to the genial leadership and enthusiasm of Séamus Duignan.

Donald Fidgeon, another great leader and motivator took over as Principal in 1966. His principalship coinsided with the most momentous event in Irish education, the introduction of free education into all second level schools and also the provision of free school transport. Also at this time the Intermediate (now Junior) and Leaving Certificate courses were introduced into Vocational Schools.

There was a massive influx of students into Drumkeerin. To accommodate them, pre-fabricated classrooms were provided. The number of teaching staff grew accordingly. All of these were to impact most favourably on the Drumkeerin area. There was a huge spin off, which was not just economic. It was also to have a most positive effect on the social and cultural development of the region.

Prior to 1966 the Vocational School had influenced three teachers and their families to reside in Drumkeerin. After 1967, seven more teachers and their families settled in Drumkeerin. This was to have a huge impact on the community. Not only did they bring money into circulation; they also contributed enormously to the social and cultural

development of Drumkeerin. They became very involved in community organisations promoting the welfare of the area. Their families contributed significantly to growth of school numbers and to the social and recreational activities.

Such was the expansion in numbers a new school was built but not until after Mr Fidgeon and his staff had vigorously campaigned for it. The beautiful new school opened in November 1986. Regrettably Mr Fidgeon was taken from us in 1993. The school was most fortunate to get another principal, Stephanie Gibbons, with great energy, enthusiasm and vision. The school has now its highest ever enrolment. The school has two very successful post Leaving Certificate courses, an outdoor pursuits and recreational course and also a computer-secretarial course. As young students and mature students learn and study side by side in Lough Allen College one can most certainly conclude that the school has integrated into the community and the community has grown into the school. Many of the PLC Students were, decades ago, young and shy students starting out in Drumkeerin Vocational School.

The story of Vocational Education in Drumkeerin is one of continued growth. An extension is planned for the school. The schedule of accommodation is agreed. This is a huge development and includes a sports hall, which will further add to the importance of the school to the community.

Seventy years ago the Vocational Education Act set up the Vocational School System. Drumkeerin Vocational School has most certainly made a huge impact on the local community. Post graduate students of Lough Allen College hold top positions in the world of construction, commerce, finance and economics, engineering, medical and education. Perhaps they may ask themselves what kind or place would Drumkeerin be now if Mr Séan Doherty CEO and the VEC had not secured in January 1934, £8000 to build eight Vocational Schools in Co Leitrim.

GUESTS OF HONOUR IN SALT LAKE CITY PARADE

Pictured above are Cyril & Margie Cullen with Emily , Benita , Tara and Margot, who as guests of honour for the St.Patrick's Day Parade in Salt Lake City, Utah, were driven through the streets in a horse drawn carriage.

During their 3 Concerts, there were standings ovations for "The Cullen Harpers", who as guests of the Hibernian Society of Utah and Lord Mayor Rocky Anderson, enthralled cosmopolitan audiences drawn from Celtic, Mormon and indeed sports enthusiasts in Salt Lake City for the Winter Olympics.