

Speech for Deputy Bertie Ahern

At the International Council for the Education of the Visually Impaired European Conference

Trinity College, Dublin

Sunday, 5th July 2009

I would like to extend a warm welcome to everyone here to Trinity College. I am personally delighted to be with you today to mark the opening of the 7th European Conference on the education and support of people with a visual impairment organised by ICEVI Europe. I wish to add a special word of welcome to all our international attendees and esteemed speakers who have travelled from many parts of Europe and beyond. The 'land of a thousand welcomes' greets you! You are especially fortunate to be spending a week in the beautiful surroundings of Trinity College, one of the many jewels in our city's crown.

The hosting of the 2009 conference here in Ireland marks in a very special way the celebration by St. Joseph's Centre for the Visually Impaired of their 150 years of devotion to the community it serves so well. Those services are many and varied. I note from the programme that staff from the Centre will have significant inputs to this conference, focusing on school-age issues, the work of the National Braille Production Centre, developing staff competence in response to diversity and inclusion and the challenging area of multiple disability. I know that St. Joseph's took to the role of hosts with great commitment and energy. This conference is truly a testament to the work carried out by St Joseph's and more specifically by Fr William Stuart, Director of Planning who organised this wonderful event.

For our international guests you may be aware of the developments in resources for special needs education in Ireland over the past 10 years. The Government will continue to prioritise this key area of our education system to ensure that all children with special educational needs, including those with visual impairments, will continue to receive an education appropriate to their needs. We intend to build on the progress that has been achieved in recent years which has seen great increases in teaching and other resources for special needs education, reflecting very significant education policy directions in this area. Education is one of only three Government Departments to have increased funding in 2009. The total investment in education in 2009 will be €9.6 billion – over treble what it was in 1997 – and €1 billion of this will be allocated across services for special needs.

We are proud of our education services to children and young people with visually impairment. I would cite here, in particular, the work of three agencies that support practitioners in this field. The National Council for Special Education was formally established in October 2005 under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN Act) to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities with particular emphasis on children. The Special Education Support Service provides specialist training and support for teachers of visually impaired children in our schools. Finally, a small but highly dedicated group of visiting teachers works with over 1000 visually impaired children and young people from pre-school age through to third level, and with families and schools, to support their full participation in the education system.

The theme of this year's conference is "Living in a Changing Europe". Hans Welling, Chairperson of ICEVI Europe, in his website welcome to the conference, spoke of the issues involved in the apparent movement of responsibility and decision-making for people with impairments away from government and onto the individuals themselves. He rightly raises the challenges for professionals and for support organisations in this context. The challenge is to think, not only about their own ongoing services to clients and the need to maintain knowledge and skills, but also now about ways those services can be developed to support the greater independence of visually impaired persons within their home, school, work-place or social communities. In Irish education, we have long recognised the desire of parents that their children be educated in mainstream settings – that has meant very significant challenges for our system and for our schools and teachers.

There will, undoubtedly, be significant learning for all attendees at this very important conference. I know you have a busy schedule for the week so I would like to end by commending everyone involved in the organisation of this conference – especially your hosts - and I hope you all enjoy the rest of your week here in Dublin..

Thank you.