

Synge Street - where did it all go right?

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The success of Mark Kelly and Eric Doyle in bringing the prestigious BT Young Scientist Award to 'Synger' for an unprecedented third time has brought into focus the reasons behind the extraordinary turn-around in the school's fortunes over the past few years

IN 150 YEARS, Synge Street CBS has seen its fair share of change. In many ways its history has mirrored that of its surroundings in Dublin's South inner city. When the city centre heaved with people, the school catered for up to 600 students, some of whom travelled from as far afield as Kildare and Louth to get the Christian Brothers' education that was unavailable to them locally. It taught future presidents and taoisigh, famous actors and sportsman as well as innumerable pillars of Irish society.

Nowadays, the school is half the size that it once was, but numbers are steady, and have been for the past 12 years. Academic progression is on the rise and two of its students just won the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition, an unprecedented third time for one school.

It's an extraordinary feat, especially considering the enormous changes that the school has faced over the past 20 years. In the mid 1990s, enrolment tumbled. Between 1997-2000, numbers were falling by 100 per year. But then in 2000, suddenly the figures stabilised and there has been little change since.

It's a phenomenon that was mirrored in other inner-city schools. Reasons were complex, but much of the drop had to do with the opening of community colleges in areas from which people used to travel.

The depopulation of the inner city took its toll, as did the gentrification of the same areas (if someone can pay a million euro for a redbrick cottage, they're unlikely to choose a State education for their child). Inner city State schools were simply left with a smaller population to teach.

No school could absorb such huge losses so quickly without it taking its toll. When principal Michael Minnock arrived in Synge Street CBS in 2005, he was the third person to hold the position in five years. That instability in leadership had also created problems. Although the numbers were steady, academic progression rates were very poor.

“We’re the closest school to DIT,” Minnock says. “But we weren’t sending anyone there. That wasn’t right.” Minnock and his deputy principal, Brendan Keenan decided that this was to be their priority.

“Students were opting deliberately for the lowest level,” Minnock says, “if there was a foundation level, they would take it and we felt that was wrong. There were a lot of talented guys here.”

Students were encouraged to take higher-level subjects, which eventually fed into the Leaving Cert. Career guidance has been crucial.

On asking why so few students were applying for the CAO, teachers discovered that January was a time when people were simply broke.

Now the school offers a facility where it funds students’ applications and the student repays the money over time. “Occasionally we’ll lose a few quid but it’s probably money well spent,” Minnock says.

A huge boost came in the form of a deceased past pupil, Con Creedon who bequeathed a million euro trust fund to the school which enabled them to set up the Creedon Educational Trust. Students apply and are awarded sums of €350-€1,000 for at least three years.

Awards are given in November. “Students have got to college, they’re settled. Maybe the first inklings of disillusionment are setting in,” says Minnock. “But then they’re invited back for a bit of acclamation and of course, a cheque. It gives them a boost.” The school is now supporting its first postgrad students through the scheme.

The small stuff matters. Shaking hands, eye contact, confidence – it’s all emphasised. “We try to make them feel like the latest link in that long line of distinguished past pupils. We want them to feel that they have a right to go to college,” Minnock says.

It’s working. Progression rates have shot up. Last year, 57 per cent of students went to universities and institutes of technology. Add in the 26 per cent who went on to do further education courses and you get an academic progression of 83 per cent. That’s an improvement of more than 400 per cent since 2005, according to Minnock.

Interestingly, the recession has led to some students, who might have left school for a job, staying on and completing the Leaving Cert with many opting for further education.

Minnock explains: “475 points from a lad who couldn’t speak English four years ago is a stunning achievement as far as I’m concerned.”

Challenges are coming thick and fast. Like many schools, money is an issue. Voluntary contributions are low thanks to the recession. Capitation grants aren't stretching as far as they used to.

Minnock views the upcoming cuts with trepidation. "Don't get me wrong, the department has been very good to us. . . but we have fears," he says.

"We don't know what we're facing yet but will probably have to look at things like reduced subject choice. We will have to look at things like the programmes we have on offer. We'll have to look at how we organise classes. We could be looking at a cutback, all told, of more than 80 classes per week. I'm not sure it can be done."

Despite all the worries coming down the line, this week is a good one for the school. The BT Young Scientist trophy sits in Minnock's office. Winners Eric Doyle and Mark Kelly are taking it to show the students in the different years throughout the day.

"It's really something," says Minnock with a smile. "Everyone, no matter what their place on the academic spectrum, is so keen to congratulate the boys. They feel a part of the success. The boys have the right to aspire to excellence and it's our mission to help them along that route."

HARD WORK BEHIND WINS

Synge Street CBS is the only school to have won the overall award at the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition three times. It's a serious business in the school. Teachers and students are told what will be required: a full year of work, including 25-hour weeks during Easter and summer holidays. Those that decide to go through with it commit to it fully. "There are meltdowns, and cries of 'I can't do it', throughout the year, but they always turn up on the following day," says Minnock.

The entries started with science teacher Jim Cooke and the school has had huge success in the competition. Although Cooke has now retired, the achievements have continued. Since 2003, the school has won a total of 24 awards. Below is just a taster.

2012 – Overall winner, Mark Kelly and Eric Doyle; 2009 – Best individual, Andrei Triffo; 2008 – 3rd Senior Individual, Olawale Hassan; 2007 – Overall winner, Abdusalam Abubakar; 2006 – Best group, Keith Forea, Adrian Chisa, Sandeeo Sihag; 2006 – Individual runner up, Gohar Abassi; 2005 – Best group, Francis Wasser (lead student) 2004 – Overall winner, Ronan Larkin

HISTORY CLASS: the Christian Brothers and their pupils

WESTLAND ROW CBS

Tucked in at the back of Trinity College, Westland Row CBS has a long history.

The Christian Brothers arrived in the present school in 1844. Within a few years the school had a joint enrolment of 400 students. Padraig Pearse attended the school as a pupil-teacher in 1896. There was a primary school on the site but in 1988 this amalgamated with the Mercy Girls' School and moved to a premises in Baggot Street. Two years later the secondary school decided to open its door to girls. There has been a lay principal in the school since 1994.

Famous students: Padraig Pearse, Ken Doherty and Cyril Cusack

Enrolment pattern: The figure of 400 in the 1800s was likely to have been a combination of both primary and post primary students. By 1990, the post-primary enrolment was 172. This dropped throughout the 1990s to a low of 111 in 2000. Since then, numbers have risen and from 2005, they seem to have stabilised, resting at around 130 students. The most recent enrolment figure is 124.

ST JOSEPH'S CBS FAIRVIEW

Joey's, as it is known, will celebrate 125 years in Irish education next year. The primary school was established first as a school where trainee Christian Brother teachers could hone their craft. 1890 saw the opening of the post-primary school in one of the primary school rooms. The secondary school opened in a new building in 1958. Nowadays, the school educates boys to Leaving Cert but accepts both boys and girls for its repeat Leaving Cert class. Sport is a huge part of school life and it has ongoing links with Zambia.

Famous students: Harry Boland, Brendan Gleeson and Charles Haughey

Enrolment pattern: In the early to mid 1990s, St Joseph's enrolment was up around 500, but by the end of the 1990s, in common with many similar schools, numbers had fallen to 300. They slipped to a low of 236 in 2005 but have been climbing slightly ever since. The most recent figure is 260.

O'CONNELL SCHOOL North Richmond Street

Daniel O'Connell laid the foundation stone for O'Connell School in 1828. The school is the oldest Christian Brothers' school in Dublin. O'Connell's has a unique place in Irish literature having been mentioned in Joyce's Dubliners story Araby.

In more recent times, the school has, like many inner city schools, welcomed a large number of foreign national students into its ranks. The school is particularly proud of its Zambian immersion programme in Mongu, capital of Zambia's Western Province.

Famous students: James Joyce, Luke Kelly, Pat Kenny, Bill Cullen

Enrolment pattern: In 1990, O'Connell School was educating 915 boys. With the opening of community colleges in the late 1980s, its numbers fell steadily to 686 in

1995. By 2000, there were 375 students attending the school but since then, numbers have remained reasonably steady, staying at about 340 since 2005. There are 344 students enrolled this year.

JAMES'S STREET CBS

Again with a history that stretches over 150 years, the school was originally based in James's Street near the Guinness Brewery entrance. The current building dates back to 1980. Gaelic football, hurling and soccer are an important part of school life and the school has made a huge effort to welcome foreign national students throughout the years.

Famous students: Tom Dunne, Jim Mitchell, Brian Kerr

Enrolment pattern: Although James's St CBS has experienced a drop in enrolment, the pattern has been slightly different to other schools. It actually experienced a rise in 1990-1995 when enrolment reached a high of 492. After that, numbers fell to 285 in 2000. There were 290 on the books in 2005 and they have been falling gradually since then. The current figure stands at 244.

ST VINCENT'S CBS Glasnevin

St Vincent's was founded as an orphanage and school in 1844. The Christian Brothers took over the running of the school in 1863 and the present day building opened its doors in 1965. The school prides itself on inclusiveness, equality and respect for diversity. It has Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian and Polish sections on its website.

Famous students: Eamon Coughlan, Kenny Cunningham, Aidan Gillen

Enrolment pattern: Student numbers were up at 533 in 1990. The fall to 478 between then and 1995 wasn't huge although the drop sharpened with a total enrolment of 372 in 2000. Numbers had fallen to 300 by 2005, but have begun to rise since then. There are 330 students currently on the books.

ST PAUL'S CBS Nth Brunswick Street

It's the original School Around the Corner. "The Brunner" dates back to 1869, when the school site was bought for £1,000 and the school was built for £4,000. In the early days, up to 500 students packed into just six classrooms. Nowadays, the primary school is housed in that building while the secondary school occupies a more modern building built in 1998. The Brunner has a rock school where students learn instruments such as guitar and drums, as well as a keen involvement in sport – mainly Gaelic games and soccer.

Famous students: Johnny Giles, Finbarr Flood, Sean Cromien

Enrolment pattern: St Paul's CBS had 368 students on the books in 1990 and this remained reasonably stable through to 1995. However, numbers dropped to 278 in 2000 and further again to just 203 in 2005. However, enrolments are recovering and by 2008 the figures were back up to 250. There are 259 students enrolled in the school.

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