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Education - who needs it?

By Jeremy Quinton



It's been a hard time recently to be a news story.

As the world talks of economic crisis, the U.S elections plus implications of a new president, *and little else.....*it's a time when many other stories simply don't make it onto the front pages of the news. They go unnoticed.

One such story running in Europe just now, is that of the moves by the Italian government to make huge cuts in its education budget. The cuts will affect all levels & ages of the education system - students, teachers & university lecturers alike. The government is run, again, by the man the BBC describe as "the perma-tanned" Silvio Berlusconi - "one of Italy's most colourful figures". Not many countries, democratic ones at least, can claim to have leaders who are internationally described as being as charismatic as their top criminals.

At the end of October the Italian government passed a school reform law, with 162 senators voting in favour and 134 against. Both before and since then, huge demonstrations have been taking place across Italy to protest against both the decision, and the way in which the Education Minister Mariastella Gelmini has

pushed the reform package through without any consultation with those parties affected.

In Italy, primary school children currently spend 40 hours a week in school, and receive academic tuition from three different teachers specialised in the different subjects they teach. Starting from next year they will go to school for only 24 hours and will have only one teacher for all the subjects, finishing school at 12.30. Many of the implications are clear - which subjects will cease to be taught? Where will kids go after school? How will parents cope with the extra logistical & financial constraints of looking after their kids? Another concern is the introduction of a 10-point grading system to evaluate not school & exam work, but pupils' behaviour.

Apart from the direct & immediate changes that the package will bring about, some estimates say that 160,000 teachers stand to lose their jobs in the primary sector alone. Critics say that the changes are the result of Berlusconi's plans to axe the public education system and favour a private one.

Heading over the boot of Italy & into Greece, it was Plato who once said that

The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life.

Within only hours of writing this, out west across the Atlantic the future course of the USA, some say the planet is being decided. What importance will the 44th president of what's still the most powerful economic & political force on the planet give to educating the youngest people?

Not long ago colleague Dónal asked in the title of an article "*What's education for?*"

A good question.

But can anyone in a position of power actually deliver a coherent answer?