



School entry in Limerick: When pupils become masters

By PATRICIA FEEHILY

CONFRONTED for the first time this year with the effects of the ending of the baby boom, many Limerick secondary schools are gearing themselves for tough competition in the years ahead. Ironically for Limerick people who have had to fight tooth and nail for a place in a secondary school over the past decade, the day may not be that far off when school principals could find themselves forced to start promoting their establishments at the very gates of the Maternity Hospital.

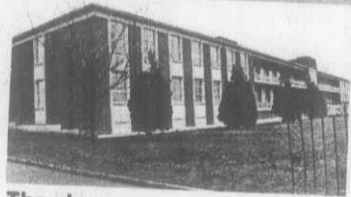
Most schools in the city, still oversubscribed, are keeping a low profile on the issue at the moment but the pinch is being felt very much in the county, where all VEC schools for instance have changed their names.

Vocational schools in the county from last year have been named after a saint and are called colleges.

All schools which do not have a transition year are at present examining the feasibility of providing a six-year cycle.

Many of them are doing so in the light of prospective falling enrolment in the coming years.

The picture changes from area to area, with factors which contribute to a drop in enrolment in one area being compensated for in other areas by new housing schemes, returning emigrants, and more and more families opting to live in rural



The day may not be far off, writes Patricia Feehily, when Limerick school principals could find themselves forced to start promoting their establishments at the very gates of the Maternity Hospital. (LL)

Limerick.

The Baptism statistics for the general area, including those parts of the county which supply pupils to city schools, show a decline of over 200 between 1980 and 1991. The sharpest drop occurred in 1986 when the total baptisms for the area went down from 1,060 the previous year to 852, suggesting that schools will have almost until the end of the century before being hit by a real enrolment crisis.

However, Department of Education estimates of the numbers seeking post-primary places in Limerick in the coming years suggest that two years from now in 1996, there will be a massive drop of nearly 300. The numbers, however, are expected to rise again in the following years.

Nevertheless the Department also concedes that with a 46% drop in births in Limerick city in the period from 1980 to 1989 "the numbers seeking post-primary places will decline significantly in the longer term."

The output of pupils from primary schools in the Limerick city catchment area this year is estimated at 1,748. But this catchment area shares primary schools with second level schools in Shannon, Killaloe, Newport, Croom, Pallaskenry and Askeaton. In 1996 the estimated output from those

primary schools will be down to 1,481, according to recent returns from the schools.

County VEC chairman, Cllr Jim McCarthy, who is also vice-principal at St Nessian's Community College, says that while falling enrolment is already "fairly acute" in primary schools, it will be a couple of years before any significant effect from the declining birth rate will be felt in post-primary schools.

Cllr McCarthy also believes that the option of a transition year will have a big impact on second-level student populations.

St Nessian's is one of those schools which already has responded to the challenge, producing its own to class news magazine.

"Parents are demanding professionalism. We have to move with the times," said Cllr McCarthy.

In St Joseph's Secondary School in Kilmallock, enrolment figures are going against the trend at present, with an increase of 20 in last year's enrolment of 65 pupils.

Principal Sr Ann, however, acknowledges that the signs are ominous and that numbers are going down in the primary schools which provide them with pupils—Kilmallock, Effin, Bruree and Bulgaden.

She has confidence in the future, however, believing that co-education will be a big selling point for any school in future years.

At the Convent of Mercy in Doon, the principal, Sr Mary of Mercy, says that it will be at least another two years before numbers begin to drop.

Sr Mary also believes that the three-year senior cycle which her school is examining at present, will make a big difference to pupil numbers,

WHACKS: Starting primary school this academic year, will these Limerick post-baby-boomers be able to pick and choose when it comes to second-level places? From the top: Scoil Ide, Lisnagry, St Senan's and Mary Queen of Ireland. (LL)

Power struggle: Limerick loses out