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Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System

1. Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this paper

This Consultation Paper has been written to invite views, observations and suggestions on the issue of advancing the autonomy of state-funded primary and post-primary schools in Ireland. The paper sets out for consideration some options for increasing that autonomy and for how accountability mechanisms may need to be developed or evolved as that change happens. Those options are informed by a detailed review of the research on school autonomy and the feasibility of a range of possible options for advancing school autonomy. This review of the research is set out in Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System – Research and Discussion Paper, published by the Department of Education and Skills in October 2015, which is an important companion document to this consultation paper.

This discussion of school autonomy arises from the proposals in the Programme for Government 2011-2016 to make changes in relation to the autonomy of schools over aspects of staffing, budget, curriculum, governance and ethos. For example, it is envisaged under the Programme that:

- Schools will have greater autonomy “to set their own staffing needs”
- Principals and boards will have increased freedom to allocate and manage staff and to delegate management responsibilities to teachers
- Parents and local communities will have more say in the patronage of schools
- The devolution of an annual capital budget to schools will be piloted
- Local communities will have more control over educational infrastructure
- Curricula will be reformed to improve attainment in literacy, mathematics and science and to encourage greater innovation and independent learning (Programme for Government 2011-2016, pps. 1, 3, 9-13).

Giving greater decision-making to schools and their local communities over their own work, as envisaged in the Programme for Government, is underpinned by three main aims: achieving greater democratic participation in schools, improving the efficiency of the school system, and improving the quality of the education that students receive. The third of these aims – improving the quality of education for students – is fundamental to the Programme’s plans for advancing school autonomy. International experience suggests that changes to school autonomy can contribute to school development and improved outcomes for students where those changes are carefully considered, based on agreed aims and where appropriate supporting structures are in place, including training for school communities and robust accountability processes.

In publishing this Consultation Paper and the accompanying Research And Discussion Paper, the Department is initiating a system-wide discussion of a range of issues relating to school
autonomy, presented here as a series of questions. These questions do not ask whether we should advance school autonomy; that we should is taken for granted based on the research we have conducted and on the commitments already made in the Programme for Government. Instead, the focus is on the dimensions of school life in which autonomy should be extended; the level of autonomy which is appropriate; what we need to do to achieve this; and what accountability is required.

In putting forward a set of options for consideration and possible actions to advance school autonomy in this paper, we have taken account of the following:

- The current educational and cultural context of the Irish school system
- The desirability of achieving the intended impacts of greater autonomy
- The advantages and disadvantages of a range of options for advancing school autonomy
- Changes to accountability mechanisms that may be needed as school autonomy increases.

1.2 What do we mean by ‘School Autonomy’?

School autonomy involves the freeing of schools from centralised and bureaucratic control or, put simply, the decentralising of decision-making to schools. Increasing the autonomy of schools generally involves giving greater decision-making to schools. It can enable schools to make their own decisions about aspects of their operation and work. It can also involve parents, patrons, communities, or a combination of all of these, having a greater say in the operation and work of schools.

Internationally, the decision-making power devolved to schools varies considerably. Our research found that schools can be autonomous to varying degrees regarding different dimensions of their work and operation. Those dimensions can usefully be categorised as follows:

- Governance, management and ethos
- Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
- Budget and funding

The level of autonomy within each of these dimensions can also vary, so that schools may be authorised to make some or all of the decisions within each dimension without reference to a central authority such as the Department of Education and Skills. To facilitate discussion and consultation about advancing autonomy in Irish schools, we are presenting the options on which views are sought under these dimensions in the following sections of this paper.

It is fair to say that autonomy is best considered as a continuum in terms of the degree to which the power/authority to make decisions is devolved to the school. At one end, autonomy can be extensive. For example, schools can be given full decision-making authority over all
dimensions of their operation, including the hiring and firing of personnel, including teachers; determination of what should be taught and to which students; responsibility for the assessment of teachers and pedagogical practices; control of full budget with freedom to determine how monies are spent. At the other end of the continuum, schools can have very little decision-making authority, with central government determining almost all of the work of the school. Between these two extremes, schools may have more or less freedom to make decisions about a smaller or greater number of dimensions of their work and operation. Irish schools are currently placed between these two extremes, with a great deal of autonomy over many aspects of their work.

Internationally, autonomy in schools is never ‘absolute’ but is constrained within a set of clear expectations in regard to actions and outcomes. These are generally set out in government policy and schools are accountable for them. Research tells us that increasing school autonomy needs to be balanced with increased accountability measures: while schools may be granted greater freedoms over aspects of their work, these need to be accompanied with effective accountability mechanisms.

We know from the experience of other countries that school autonomy is most effectively shaped and achieved when it fits appropriately into the broader national policy and social context in which it is developed. In other words, it is important that there is broad consensus on its objectives; that a staged implementation process which builds system capacity is activated; and that there are robust accountability systems in place to ensure that autonomy is not ill-used.

1.3 Why should we increase the autonomy of schools?

Identifying an agreed set of objectives, or the ‘Why?’ of increased school autonomy is an important first step before we discuss ‘what’ powers should be devolved to schools. We know from the experience of other countries that the design and implementation of school autonomy has an important bearing on outcomes. Depending on the objectives set for school autonomy, devolved local decision-making over some aspects of the work of the school can be advantageous and in others, it may be that a more centralised approach would be preferable. For that reason, setting out the desirable goals of advancing school autonomy in the Irish context is a key intention of this consultation process.

The aims of increasing autonomy vary and can include those of achieving school and local democracy, decentralising and improving the working of state organisations and improving the quality of education. This third aim has become much more important in international school reform measures and school autonomy is now regarded largely as a tool to be used to improve the quality of education (Eurydice, 2007). This perspective is based on the view that:

- Schools will function better if they are autonomous and accountable
- Those closest to the school know how best to serve the students
- Schools that are in difficulty will improve if they have the flexibility to make changes to their teachers or staff.

A very strong thread through the research literature is that increased autonomy is intended to result in better outcomes for students. The quality of the learning experience that schools provide is influenced by a range of factors, such as the quality of teaching, school leadership and curriculum. Having decision-making authority in relation to what students should be taught, by whom and in what manner, for example, could facilitate a bespoke approach to curriculum design and delivery in a school. This could mean that the education provided can be tailored to the specific needs of the school’s students, in contrast to a one-size-fits-all approach. Thus, the argument goes, students are more likely to be more successful in such a situation.

However, the evidence that increased levels of school autonomy result in improvements in students’ achievement is not consistent. The literature is divided and it is not clear that there is a causal link between increased school autonomy and improved learner outcomes. There are a number of factors that can impact on students’ learning. They include:

- the instructional leadership skills of the principal
- the qualifications and practice of teachers
- the extent to which teachers engage in ongoing professional development
- the level of engagement and expectation amongst parents
- the accountability mechanisms in place (such as the mechanisms for reporting to parents and the publication of information on the effectiveness of the school).

It can be argued that these factors are much more influential than autonomy. The literature also includes research by many eminent educationalists who reject a cause-and-effect relationship between student/school improvement and increased school autonomy, pointing out that the two cannot be closely associated since few self-management initiatives are systematically linked with what happens in classrooms. This signals that any move to advance autonomy in schools should create the necessary supports and incentives to schools to maintain a strong focus on classroom practice. Schools that have experienced increased levels of autonomy and subsequently have been successful in affecting student achievement have been found by researchers to enjoy high levels of parental involvement; extensive, individualised in-school support to assist with the changes in autonomy; and teaching approaches which are centred on the individual student. These schools also tend to be located within a context of a social system and environment which supports high levels of social equity.

The effects on student outcomes of granting more autonomy to schools are hard to predict. The implications of increasing levels of school autonomy are complex as there are many factors which interact to affect student achievement. While the philosophical and ideological arguments for increasing school autonomy have some persuasive power, the evidence-based experiences are less persuasive and mean that changes to school autonomy must be very carefully planned and delivered.
There are a variety of objectives which increased school autonomy might achieve. For example, depending on how it is configured, it can radically alter the way parents and the local community engage with their schools. In the literature, greater school autonomy is linked to moves for greater democratic participation in education, including the desire to involve the local community and parents in the running of schools. Many of the school autonomy reforms internationally have also strengthened parental involvement in the schools, most particularly as partners in decision-making. Strengthened parent councils, for example, play an over-sight role in some countries and/or provide advice to school management authorities.

1.4 Developing accountability

Our research shows that to be effective, greater autonomy for schools has to be balanced by greater accountability measures. In considering the question of how best to advance school autonomy in the Irish school system, we need to identify the necessary elements in its accountability framework and set out how they are to be realised.

To ensure that school autonomy is effective in achieving intended goals, decisions made at school level should be framed within national policy. Policy can be set out in legislation or regulation and expressed as a set of broad principles to inform decision-making or more specific directions which constrain or limit the scope of decision making. Our research shows that to be effective, greater school autonomy needs to be accompanied by a legislative or regulatory framework which defines a set of conditions which must be met by the school. These may include quality standards, qualifications of teachers; and compliance with prescribed curriculum requirements, for example. A key element of national policies in countries in which schools enjoy high levels of autonomy is an accountability requirement, intended to monitor students’ progress and teaching staff performance and to publish information about school achievements.

To be effective, increased autonomy should be set within a clear accountability framework, which matches each objective or goal which greater autonomy is intended to achieve with relevant measures of performance. For example, if it is intended that greater autonomy should result in improved outcomes for students, the accountability framework should include educational outcomes achieved and investment/engagement in professional development activities for teachers and school leaders to improve future educational outcomes. A process for performance management and review for decision-makers such as the principal is also a necessary part of the accountability framework, so that those to whom decision-making is devolved are held to account for the impact of their decisions. A third element in an effective accountability framework may concern how schools report publicly about their performance to parents and the wider public.
Alongside its proposals for changing certain decision-making responsibilities regarding schools, the Programme for Government sets out a number of related proposals for developing accountability:

- The proposed increased autonomy of schools over staffing will be ‘within strict budgets and new accountability systems’
- Schools will be required to draw up five-year development plans
- Parents will have access to more information when choosing a school for their children
- A ‘new system of self-evaluation’ requiring schools to evaluate their performance year-on-year will be introduced
- Schools will publish annual reports.

### 1.5 Building the right environment

Experience in other countries demonstrates that greater school autonomy can only work if schools have the capacity to manage and use the autonomy. If school autonomy is to be advanced in Irish schools, we need to consider how best to build the capacity of education stakeholders at the grassroots level to ensure that autonomy initiatives do not fail. We also need to develop an implementation plan which takes account of the resources that we can realistically make available.

The experiences of other school systems tells us that changes to school autonomy must be very carefully planned and delivered. The devolution of decision-making power to schools must be in circumstances where it is clear that there is the local will and capacity to manage that responsibility and where the necessary resources are available to support its implementation.

Many school autonomy initiatives have come unstuck because of the lack of leadership capacity to manage autonomy, at both community and school levels. For example, the OECD has attributed the serious failure of a decade-long move to school autonomy in Sweden and the resulting decline in student achievement in that country mainly to a lack of capacity to manage autonomy at school level. Currently, boards of management in Irish schools are peopled by volunteers. As school autonomy is advanced, the demands on these boards will grow and it will be necessary to professionalise elements of management duties to meet accountability requirements. Equally, there is a consistent view in the literature that a change in autonomy brings a much more complex and challenging environment for principals to navigate, increasing significantly the workload and level of responsibility which attaches to the role. There is value in exploring further autonomy for school principals, however. Research indicates that the scope for school leaders to influence school outcomes is low where decision-making responsibilities in relation to matters of curriculum, teaching and learning are constrained.

The capacity and willingness of parents to assume greater role in managing schools is also a challenge. If autonomy is to work in terms of delivering a better quality education and greater
responsiveness to local need, schools must engage parents. In many countries, parents tend to not play an active part in the operation of the schools. Participation is determined by the socioeconomic level of the neighbourhood of the school or, in some systems, parents simply trust schools and see little reason to become involved. Nevertheless, where parents are actively engaged in schools and have the authority to influence educational provision which autonomy may provide, the research indicates that there is greater likelihood that it will lead to better outcomes for their children.

Where autonomy works to improve outcomes for students, it is supported by the work of highly qualified teachers, capable of curriculum design and quality assessment practices. Having the authority to make decisions about curriculum, teaching and learning approaches and assessment practices enlarges the scope of the job of teaching. It also requires more time and energy from them and it cannot be taken for granted that all teachers will have the necessary skills or will appreciate having to take on additional responsibilities. Investment in a programme of rigorous and in-depth professional development for teachers is needed to equip teachers to use the decision-making authority which increased autonomy can provide to the best advantage of their students.

International experience suggests that changes to school autonomy have worked best when they have been accompanied by high-levels of individualised, in-school, adaptive support from trainers with relevant expertise and where communities of practice have developed to support principals and teachers in promoting innovation, creativity and high education standards.

The US and UK experience indicates that the availability of resources is a significant driving factor in creating a positive environment for school autonomy. There are significant cost implications to be considered in relation to advancing school autonomy. This includes staff costs, both at central government level and at the level of the school, to ensure appropriate administrative arrangements are in place, and the cost of additional training for school management and teachers. The research also indicates that additional resourcing of schools through higher grants; additional teachers; support personnel, etc, is not effective in supporting increased autonomy where professional capacity at the level of school management is lacking.

Resource implications may also go much further than extra funding. There may be opportunity costs also, where existing resources have to be diverted to funding the cost of advancing school autonomy. This could mean that other initiatives cannot be progressed. An analysis of the resource implications should be undertaken in the context of competing projects and priorities.

1.6 Context of proposed options for consideration

The work currently underway by the Department of Education and Skills, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Teaching Council and the Centre for School Leadership
provides the context within which the range of possibilities for developing school autonomy could be developed and implemented.

Schools in Ireland include organisations that differ in terms of size and governance arrangements. The respective roles of trustees, patrons, owners, boards of management and principals in decision-making vary somewhat across sectors and with differing levels of autonomy in different dimensions.

The legislative framework already in place confers a high degree of autonomy on schools across a range of functions. It is fair to say, however, that Irish primary and second-level schools, although funded by the State, enjoy:

- a high level of autonomy in relation to pedagogy, (within the parameters of guidelines and expectations) and staff appointments
- a moderate level of autonomy in relation to staff management and assessment, minor works and small to medium scale capital works, and
- less autonomy in relation to curriculum content and major capital expenditure.

It should also be noted that significant work has begun or is already well underway which will help to provide the required structural supports for extending school autonomy:

**School leadership:** For some time, there has been relatively little investment by the State in the systematic development in the professional skills of school leaders in Ireland, and this lacuna impacts on the capacity of school leaders to take on a wider set of leadership tasks and roles. The current overall capacity of school leaders is also limited by the fact that a greater than normal number of experienced school leaders left the profession in recent years, partly because of incentives for public servants to retire earlier than normal during the economic crisis.

However, there are hopeful signs that the professional education of principals will be improved in the medium term. In 2015, the Minister for Education and Skills announced the establishment of a national centre for school leadership to provide professional development and support for teachers in leadership roles. In addition, the Department of Education and Skills has announced a tendering process to identify suitable third-level providers of leadership programmes for existing and aspiring school leaders. Over time, all of these initiatives will help to develop the capacity of Irish school leaders to take on both the administrative and educational challenges of school leadership, and may equip them to accept the new freedoms, roles and responsibilities that greater school autonomy would bring.

Further, while the majority of middle management posts available in schools have been retained, (though they are unevenly distributed across the system), there has been depletion in the size of middle management teams at both levels. This is due to the fact that when teachers holding promoted posts (such as assistant principal and special duties teacher posts) retired, the resulting vacancies were generally not filled because of the public service moratorium. While there has been some improvement in this situation in respect of the
appointment of assistant principals in larger schools, and decisions announced in October 2015 as part of Budget 2016 will provide specific resources for the appointment of full-time or part-time deputy principals, in second-level schools, many schools at both levels will still have significantly reduced middle management teams.

**Parental engagement:** A number of actions that are underway to enhance parental engagement in schools have to potential to support greater school autonomy. Parents have a significant say in determining the patronage of a new school. When a new state-funded school is being considered, parental preference in relation to patronage of the school is considered. Parents’ views are also central in decisions about changes in the patronage and ethos of existing schools. Parents have to be consulted and their views considered before any change in the patronage of a school is possible.

Work has commenced to improve how schools communicate and work with parents. The Minister intends to amend Section 28 of the Education Act 1998 to provide a statutory basis for developing a *Parent and Student Charter* and to set out principles that will guide, among other things how the local relationship between parents and schools can be developed.

With the introduction of school self-evaluation, a mechanism has begun to be put in place that has the capacity to ensure that parents can have a say in reviewing the work of schools and receive better information from them on the work that the school is doing to strengthen and improve learning in the school. Self-evaluation also has encouraged schools to provide an annual report to parents. By spring 2015, more than 60% of schools had reported that they had already provided such reports to their boards of management, with many schools also providing them directly to their Parents’ Associations.

**Improving teacher professionalism:** There has been increased investment by the Department of Education and Skills in initial and ongoing teacher education, including raising entry requirements to the teaching profession. The Teaching Council has published a *Policy Paper on the Continuum of Teacher Education* from entry to initial teacher education programmes; accreditation of such programmes; induction of newly qualified teachers into the profession; and the continuing professional development of teachers throughout their careers. In addition, the Council has established and published codes of professional conduct for teachers, which include standards of teaching, knowledge, skill and competence.

Recently introduced changes to teacher education have seen the lengthening of initial teacher education courses and a shift in course content to place a greater emphasis on skills in pedagogy and assessment. Both of these developments are designed to enhance teachers’ capacity to adapt curricula and assessment practices in schools to better suit the needs of students. This will better equip teachers to utilise more fully the autonomy that schools and teachers already enjoy over curriculum and assessment.

**Curriculum reform:** The current child-centred *Primary School Curriculum* was introduced in 1999. It set out the areas of learning and subjects to be provided in primary schools and within each curriculum statement, it defined both what the child was expected to learn and how that learning would take place. It has proved to be largely successful, though criticisms have
emerged that in trying to express both *what* and *how* children were to learn, it did not give sufficient clarity to teachers regarding the learning outcomes to be achieved at each stage by students. The need for the programmes for infant classes to be revised has also become obvious since the publication of *Aistear*, the curriculum framework for early childhood education, which placed a much greater emphasis on the role of play in early years’ education.

In 2011, the Government’s *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* stated that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment would be asked to revise the curricula for languages (English and Irish) and mathematics in the light of these emerging needs. Work on these revisions has been underway since 2012, and the first elements of the revised curricula will begin to be introduced in schools in 2016/2017.

Significant developments have been announced at Junior Cycle that will, over time, increase substantially the autonomy of post-primary schools over curriculum and assessment. Further, the introduction of school self-evaluation in 2012 and the recent changes to teacher education have the potential to enable both primary and post-primary teachers and schools to exploit more fully existing curriculum and pedagogical flexibilities. At the same time, some of the flexibilities regarding certain aspects of assessment at post-primary level have been reduced.

The revised curricula at primary level will offer opportunities to provide greater curriculum flexibility to schools. They will offer greater clarity about the learning outcomes to be expected of students but the core curriculum statements will not incorporate prescriptive or recommended methodologies. Instead, these will be available in supporting online documents and examples of good practice.

The Department of Education and Skills has signalled that the Minister will prescribe the Primary School Curriculum in line with section 30 of the Education Act, 1998. This will ensure the right of all students to a broad and balanced curriculum, and will provide flexibility to Irish-medium schools to operate periods of immersion education in the early years of schooling. The revision of the Primary School Curriculum discussed above will complement this process by focusing the curriculum statements on learning outcomes and confining guidance on how the curriculum should be implemented entirely to supporting documents.

The implementation of Junior Cycle reform opens new possibilities for post-primary schools in relation to both curriculum and assessment autonomy. At Junior Cycle level, schools have been given certain flexibilities to devise and offer short courses and alternative learning experiences, thereby enabling them to plan curricula that promote innovation and independent learning. Further, the Junior Cycle Framework includes formal recognition for school-based assessment outcomes.

**Accountability measures:** A number of reforms to the ways in which schools are inspected have been implemented. Although staffing resources in the Department’s Inspectorate have not matched the increasing numbers of teachers and students served by Irish schools, the Inspectorate has reformed its approach to inspections and has put in place a programme of external inspection to identify and acknowledge good educational practice and to provide clear, practical advice as to how the quality of education provision can be improved. The
Department has also recognised that robust school self-evaluation (SSE) can usefully complement external inspection and the Inspectorate had provided materials and advisory visits to support its adoption by schools. The introduction of SSE is an important new development that has the potential to develop the capacity of the system to examine its own performance by providing a framework and criteria to assist schools in evaluating the quality of teaching and learning.

The Department’s School Improvement Group provides a mechanism for intervening where schools are in significant difficulty. The group works with schools where there are serious failures to meet quality standards and takes steps to ensure that structural and capacity improvements are put in place.

**Budget and Curriculum:** The level of autonomy and control that schools have over their finances varies according to the different elements of the funding: capital funding (land and buildings), salaries (teachers and staff), and non-pay funding. It is also worth noting that funding mechanisms vary between primary and post primary schools and within the post primary sector between voluntary secondary schools, community and comprehensive schools and community colleges.

On the capital budget side, schools have been given greater autonomy over funds for minor works and small to medium scale capital works. In line with Government policy, there have been moves to achieve better value for money by drawing together the procurement capacity of schools in terms of utilities etc. (although such measures could be seen as removing the autonomy of schools to make choices about how to spend their financial resources). A range of grants are paid to schools to cover their non-pay day-to-day costs. Schools have a high degree of autonomy in managing these according to the needs of the school and local circumstances.

In summary, improvements are planned or underway in a number of aspects of the school system that could provide a supportive context for the introduction of greater school autonomy. Clearly, greater investment in a number of areas, including the leadership capacity of schools, evaluation and accountability mechanisms, and curriculum reform will be required, but this could create the situation where schools and the school system could have the capacity to manage successfully a greater degree of school autonomy.
2. What could full school autonomy look like?

Autonomy is best considered as a continuum in terms of the degree to which the power/authority to make decisions is devolved to the school. This section of the paper describes a theoretical situation to illustrate what a school could look like at the very end of the continuum; in other words, a fully autonomous school. In doing this, we want to explore the possible advantages of advancing school autonomy. The exercise also allows us to identify potential pitfalls in greater school autonomy.

By describing what a school on the farthest point of the autonomy spectrum might be like, and in setting out the related advantages and disadvantages, we hope to stimulate consideration of the dimensions and the degree of autonomy we want to advance in the Irish school system.

2.1 The fully autonomous school

Charter schools in the United States and in Australia and academies in the UK provide us with a blueprint for the fully autonomous school. By ‘fully autonomous’ we mean a school that has complete decision-making power in respect of the following:

School Governance: The autonomous school is independent and self-governed or it may be one of a number of schools governed by an intermediary body (such as an Education and Training Board or a patron body).

Where the school is independent, it has complete responsibility for its own management. It has a self-appointed governing or management board with the authority to make decisions in relation to spending, teaching and other resources, management, parental involvement in the educational process, curriculum and instructional practices, and governance and management structures.

The responsibilities of the board in regard to the provision of education are set out in legislation and regulation and the board is accountable for this. In a fully autonomous system, legislative prescription is couched in very broad terms, to allow the board to interpret and determine what educational provision is best suited to its community.

Some fully autonomous schools may form a coalition under an intermediary body. This provides the potential to benefit from administrative support. This can reduce some of the managerial burden on principals; schools can share decision-making responsibilities and resources, including teaching resources; and schools can benefit from a community of practice approach which builds professional capacity within the coalition. The intermediary body services the coalition, exercising certain decision-making powers on their behalf. These typically include responsibility for distributing budgets; setting common priorities for development and the decision-making in the four areas which follow.

Staff management: The school board is responsible for employing all academic and non-academic staff, agreeing levels of pay and conditions of service and deciding on the policies
for staffing structure, career development, discipline, and performance management. School management have discretion to determine teachers’ terms and conditions of employment and can set aside funding to implement performance-based pay incentives.

**Student focus:** Other than where there is a legislative requirement to do so, fully autonomous schools are not constrained in terms of what students they may choose to admit or not to admit. A school can identify a specific cohort within the community as its target client base and develop admissions and other policies to support provision for that cohort.

**Teaching and Learning:** The fully autonomous school has the freedom to determine the character and distinctive nature of its curriculum, building on the strengths of its teaching staff. This allows the teachers to be more innovative and creative in their teaching approaches because they are not constrained by mandated curriculum content requirements. Schools have autonomy to develop original curricula, pedagogy, and operational strategies.

Schools that are fully autonomous have the capacity to determine the percentage of their budget which they will spend on professional development activities and to source them from a larger range of providers. This means that such activities can be determined by school priorities and not nationally mandated issues.

**Accountability:** Fully autonomous schools have greater accountability for student performance, financial matters, and effective school operations. They are required to meet national education standards specified by the central authority, or Government department. In addition, they must meet rigorous fiscal and managerial standards set by the Department.

A number of indicators of the performance of the fully autonomous school are published so that all stakeholders, including the taxpayer, are in a position to monitor the investment made in autonomy and its outcomes.

### 2.2 Advantages of full autonomy

A number of arguments are advanced in favour of full autonomy.

Full autonomy over budget and funding can lead to **greater efficiency in the use of resources.** By decentralising responsibilities around the funding of education delivery to schools or intermediary bodies, the flexibility to target resources where schools consider they are most needed, together with the authority to hire, develop and reward good teachers, it is likely that the school’s ability to provide what is needed by students and their families will increase.

A further potential efficiency is that central government no longer carries the administrative burden for these aspects of school system management, so that additional resources may be freed up for disbursement among schools. Internationally, where schools have this level of autonomy, it is achieved through a single grant to cover all aspects of the schools operation.

Some research argues that an **improved quality of education** will result from allowing decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and staffing to be made by schools themselves, fostering innovation, creativity and change. This is based on the assertion that
individual schools know best about the needs of their students and their communities and can make better decisions regarding the educational provision they offer where they have the autonomy to do so.

Curriculum and pedagogical autonomy at school or local level is frequently seen by advocates of full autonomy as a means of fostering innovation, creativity and change and a major factor in the success of the system.

The fully autonomous school may also provide, through governance structures, a more meaningful role for parents in the running of schools. Their engagement in decision-making as board members on matters relating to staffing, curriculum and assessment, for example, empowers parents as stakeholders in the school and increases the school’s accountability to them.

2.3 The risks in school autonomy

There is a range of risks which come with full autonomy for schools. These include:

**Diminished quality of outcomes for students:** There is a real risk that extending school autonomy will have a negative impact on outcomes for students. The extra administrative load on principals can take them away from educational leadership activities as they become more entrepreneurial and the focus of teachers may shift from the classroom where the conditions of their employment are changed. In the context of diminished (and diminishing resources) the opportunity costs incurred through the diversion of funding and other resources to changing school autonomy will impact on the implementation of other initiatives targeting improvement in student outcomes.

Experience in a number of other countries demonstrates that autonomous schools, held accountable for student performance, become increasingly selective in enrolment. This contributes to a two-tier education system which sees the less advantaged in schools which perform less well. Equally, some schools may have access to additional funding in economically privileged communities, for example, which allows them to better resource teaching and learning than other schools. This sets up a competition effect between schools so that schools serving advantaged communities attract more students and expand, while schools serving poorer communities run the risk of losing students and closing.

**An excessive administrative burden on principals:** Greater autonomy brings a much more complex and challenging environment for principals to navigate, increasing significantly the workload and level of responsibility which attaches to the role. In Ireland, the last five years have seen experienced principals exit through retirement and a significant number of principals are at an early stage in their careers as school leaders. If the work underway to develop career supports for school leaders is overtaken by the extension of autonomy, there is a risk that the burden on principals could be unmanageable, with consequent risks to the effective functioning of schools and to the recruitment and retention of principals. This is particularly pertinent given that two thirds of primary principals in Ireland are teaching
principals with a maximum of twenty two days administrative leave to manage their current leadership responsibilities.

The challenge of financial management: Across the literature from the US and Australia, a strong theme is the perception that devolved authority over budgets has not worked as well as expected for schools. School managers find themselves addressing financial decisions rather than educational decisions; teachers and parents express concern that the funding allocation from government shrinks relative to cost of service provision over time; and central governments are perceived to have side-stepped difficult decision-making.

There is a relatively high number of schools of comparatively small scale in the Irish school system. If budgets are devolved on a per-student basis there is a risk that schools will not have the purchasing power to achieve best value for money in procuring teaching and non-teaching services.

School budgets have to be managed efficiently and in line with public procedures. Financial mismanagement, whether malicious or negligent, can have serious consequences for the Exchequer as well as for the individual school. New robust financial management systems that would facilitate consistent financial reporting practices across the school system would have to be developed and implemented. The financial accountability systems would have to address not only good management of budget so that school spending remains within limits, but also a requirement to spend responsibly, so that limited public funding is invested in improved outcomes for students.

Salary increases: If schools have greater autonomy over salaries, in the absence of industrial relations expertise within each school, there is a real risk of salary inflation as unions deploy their expertise to engage in lengthy salary negotiations in relation to each of their members with each individual school manager. There is a challenge in ensuring that autonomy does not lead to salary inflation or bonuses/top-ups being awarded as a norm within the sector. Adherence to public sector guidelines will be a challenge as the autonomy of schools over pay budgets increases.

Negative impact of an increased burden of accountability: It is clear that accountability mechanisms are a necessary part of any system of improved autonomy for schools. However, there is a real risk that compliance with these accountability mechanisms will be perceived as a burden on the administration of the school and that the burden of compliance with accountability will be seen as outweighing the benefits of autonomy.

The risk of failure: A fully autonomous school may fail for a variety of reasons, including poor capacity to manage the responsibility to lead teaching and learning and to fulfil budgetary management responsibilities, so that schools become insolvent with the potential of receivership or liquidation. Without a range of intervention strategies managed by authorities outside the school, the facility to assure parents of the security of provision is absent.
These advantages and disadvantages are more fully discussed in the *Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System – Research and Discussion Paper*, which accompanies this consultation paper.
1. What could greater school autonomy look like in Ireland?

Having looked at what a theoretical form of full school autonomy might look like in Section 2 of this paper, this section sets out three possible areas (or dimensions) of the Irish school system in which greater autonomy might be given to schools and school communities:

- Governance, management and ethos
- Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
- Budget and funding

In the sections that follow, we will describe the options for greater autonomy that might be considered in each of these dimensions.

It is important to note that fuller discussion of the options set out below is provided in *Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System – Research and Discussion Paper*, published by the Department of Education and Skills in November 2015, which is the companion document to this consultation paper.

3.1 School governance, management and ethos

Broadly interpreted, governance refers to the ownership, organisation and management of schools. Schools in Ireland have a considerable degree of autonomy regarding their governance, ownership, management and organisation. The Education Act 1998 provides for a school management system and a patronage system that emphasises local control of schooling. Further, in all primary and post-primary schools, the school’s stated ethos (that is, the values and principles it promotes) is decided by the owners or patrons/trustees of the school and not by central government.

Options that would give greater autonomy to schools and school communities over their governance, management and ethos include the following:

**Legislation and regulation:**

1. The Education Act affirms a high degree of local autonomy over school and some changes to the legislative framework have already been announced by the Minister for Education and Skills. (These include amendment of Section 28 of the Education Act to provide for a Parent and Student Charter – see below, and an Admissions to Schools Bill to improve the regulation of how schools implement admissions policies in ways that are fair and equitable).

Generally, regulatory arrangements for Irish schools are currently weaker than would be required to support the complexity of an autonomous school system: a readily accessible single set of current regulations for the school system is lacking and some regulations are outdated. **Reform and consolidation of the regulation of schools** would be needed to underpin the management of schools and establish the appropriate mechanisms for devolved decision making and robust accountability. This reform would be essential for
the success of any move to devolve greater autonomy to schools and will require a considerable additional investment of expertise and staffing resources.

**Governance:**
2. The Parent and Student Charter currently under development could specify how the local relationship between parents and schools may be developed. It could set out expectations in relation to how:
   - a school reports to parents about the quality of education provision available to their children and, in respect of their child, the kind of information about their child’s achievements, progress and challenges that should be provided
   - parents can be facilitated to be active participants in the management of schools and to receive (with other board members) an appropriate level of training and support where they participate on school boards or in other school management structures
   - parents will be informed on a regular basis about key issues regarding the effectiveness of the education being provided by the school
   - parents can be meaningfully involved in school self-evaluation processes and to comment to the school on the quality of the school’s work

**Ethos:**
3. The work currently underway in reshaping primary school provision and providing greater diversity of school patronage should continue so that a sufficiently diverse range of primary schools is achieved.

Work is currently underway in reshaping primary school provision and providing greater diversity of school patronage. This work takes account of the recommendations of the “Report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector” (Coolahan et al, 2012). The process of selecting and appointing school patrons now involves greater emphasis being put on the views of parents and local communities, as well as schools themselves.

While progress to date on enhancing diversity in patronage has been significant in recent years, more needs to be done. It would be important that emphasis would remain on reconfiguring the profile of school patronage to reflect the diversity of communities and the wishes of parents and other stakeholders.

In 2014, the Department published the paper *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector – Progress to Date and Future Directions* (Department of Education and Skills, 2014). This paper cited examples of best practice in order to guide and encourage all schools to be inclusive and welcoming of all pupils from different backgrounds. The paper recognises that there is no “one size fits all” approach to ensuring that all schools are inclusive and welcoming. The paper encourages school authorities to use their autonomy to address these issues in ways that reflect the different context of each
particular school. Careful attention to these issues on the part of the school can play an important part in ensuring that schools reflect the diversity of their communities and the views of parents and the wider community.

**The employment/deployment of teachers:**

4. The Department of Education and Skills and Government could **consider carefully an incremental approach to increasing the autonomy of schools regarding the deployment of teachers**: The first steps in giving schools autonomy over their staffing resources have been taken in a pilot project allocating additional teaching resources to schools to support children with special educational needs. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has proposed that language support, learning support and resource teaching hours should be brought into a single pot of special educational needs (SEN) posts for schools, and that schools should have autonomy in how these resources are used to best meet the needs of their students.

   In September 2015, a pilot of the new model for allocating additional teaching resources to schools to support children with special educational needs, began in 47 schools. The aim of the pilot is to test the model in a number of schools and to allow for the practical effect of the application of the new model in pilot schools to be gauged, while also taking into account the learning experiences of schools, principals, students and the views of parents.

5. If the creation of a single pot of SEN-related teaching resources is accepted and implemented successfully, consideration should be given in due course to extending the practice to create a single pot of posts to be granted to DEIS schools with discretion to deploy those posts in accordance with identified school needs and priorities.

6. At a further stage, consideration could be given to extending this arrangement to all schools or to a sample of such schools that are highly effective.

7. **Consideration could be given to giving schools autonomy over the make-up of the additional staff resources granted to the school for purposes such as supporting inclusion (with regard to both special educational needs and DEIS-related initiatives).** For example, within the bundle of additional staff resources available to support special education needs, schools could be given the autonomy to determine whether the needs of their pupils could be best addressed through additional teachers or additional SNAs.

8. It is also possible to consider an arrangement whereby the school is given one single allocation of human resources and the autonomy to decide how the resources may be used: as teachers in classrooms and other settings, to provide teaching or other supports for the learning and inclusion of students with additional learning needs (related to special education needs, educational disadvantage, English as an additional language, etc.) or to leadership roles in the school.
**Accountability:**

9. The work currently underway in establishing robust school self-evaluation processes **could be advanced**, including the requirements to publish evaluation and school improvement reports to parents. Under current self-evaluation arrangements, schools are asked to provide an annual summary reports to parents about their priorities for improvement and their progress. International experience would suggest that requiring schools to publish their internal self-evaluation reports is counter-productive, as it may impede the necessary internal critique and drive for improvement in the school. However, there is no reason that schools should not have to report on a fixed number of issues, including their compliance with regulations and a short summary of their priorities for improvement. It is possible to extend the range of issues on which reporting is required and the level of detail to be expected.

10. The **programme of reform of external school inspection should be advanced**, to improve further the reporting of the levels of performance of schools on a number of published criteria and to increase the frequency of external inspection of schools. Providing such an external view of the performance of the school will be an important support and safeguard for quality if greater school autonomy is advanced. Inspection could also help to determine the appropriate level of autonomy to give to schools. If inspections demonstrated that the school was performing strongly, consideration could be given to increasing the level of autonomy granted to the school and reducing the frequency or intensity of inspections. Likewise, if school inspection demonstrated severe weaknesses in the provision for teaching and learning in the school, it would be legitimate to consider limiting the autonomy the school had over the deployment of teaching or other resources and increasing the frequency of inspection. All of this implies a greater frequency of inspection and published reports and an increase in inspection resources.

11. Likewise, if school inspection demonstrated severe weaknesses in the provision for teaching and learning in the school, it would be legitimate to consider limiting the autonomy the school had over the deployment of teaching or other resources. All of this implies a greater frequency of inspection and published reports and an increase in inspection resources.

12. Consideration would have to be given to establishing and funding measures to enhance the skills of school leaders (boards and principals) to manage and organise education provision effectively in the school in the context of increased staff deployment flexibilities.

**3.2 Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment**
The following options take account of the advantages and disadvantages of the range of possibilities discussed in the *Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System – Research and Discussion Paper* regarding extending school autonomy over curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as well as the related impact on leadership, teacher qualifications and accountability. The options take into account the current cultural and educational context of the Irish school system at both primary and post-primary levels.

Schools in Ireland are partly autonomous in respect of the curriculum they teach, their pedagogy, and assessment. While there is a centrally devised curriculum at both primary and post-primary levels, there is much scope for schools and teachers, within the parameters of that centrally devised curriculum, to adapt it to meet the needs of the learners.

Schools and teachers at both levels have considerable scope to make decisions about the appropriate pedagogical approach for their students. At primary level these decisions should be informed by the approaches set out in the national curriculum guidelines. At post-primary level, while particular pedagogical approaches are not stipulated in centrally published guidelines, there is an expectation that schools and teachers take account of the methods advocated in nationally provided continuing professional development and in published Inspectorate reports.

Day-to-day assessment and the feedback used to improve student performance are left to the discretion of individual schools and their teachers. However, external assessments and standardised assessments are mandated centrally. At primary level, these take the form of standardised tests at stipulated intervals. At post-primary level, state examinations are held at the end of Junior Cycle and at the end of Senior Cycle.

Options in relation to extending schools’ autonomy over their curriculum, pedagogy and assessment include the following:

**Curriculum:**

1. At present, the primary school curricula for English and Irish are currently under review. Further subjects will be reviewed in future years. As this replacement of the current national curricula for primary schools takes place, a curriculum framework approach could be adopted rather than a detailed prescriptive approach. This would mean that the curriculum would be stated as a broad set of learning outcomes together with key principles for planning, prioritising assessment and review. Within this framework schools could be given a degree of autonomy to select subjects (and to exclude others) and to decide how time should be allocated across subjects provided general national requirements in respect of literacy, numeracy, physical education and health education are satisfied. Such an approach would give flexibility and greater autonomy to schools and could allow some schools to specialise in certain areas such as the arts or the technologies. However, this option would also require careful monitoring to ensure that students experienced a balanced and broad curriculum.
2. **Greater flexibility could be granted to primary schools in relation to how they deploy teachers** to deliver the primary curriculum in order to strengthen the pedagogy in classrooms and to ensure that this is underpinned by sound subject knowledge and competence.

3. The major reforms that are already being introduced at junior cycle will bring a greatly enhanced autonomy for schools over curriculum at lower secondary level. For example, schools will have the autonomy to offer a range of traditional subjects but they will also have the option of offering a number of short courses, some of which they may design themselves within broad national guidelines. For that reason, **the curricular changes now underway at Junior Cycle should be fully implemented.**

4. Consideration could be given to extending the menu of state examinations open to post-primary students during or at the end of Senior Cycle to allow for the inclusion of a greater range of qualifications including vocationally oriented qualifications.

**Leadership:**

5. **Work currently underway to build the professional competence of school leaders should be progressed.** Developing the leadership skills of principals and deputy principals will be an essential requirement of any plans to increase school autonomy.

6. If school leaders are to realise the advantages inherent in curriculum autonomy they have to be supported by a **realistic level of support at mid-management level** in schools, with assistant or deputy school leaders whose job descriptions are more ambitious than those traditionally in the Irish system.

7. **Measures to enhance the mobility of principals could be considered,** including the introduction of a more flexible employment contract, redeployment arrangements, and fixed-term contracts.

**Teacher qualifications and skills:**

8. The continuing professional development of teachers requires improvement and **significant additional investment in teachers’ CPD** is required. The very significant changes that have begun to be implemented in initial teacher education should be monitored carefully to ensure that teachers are adequately prepared for the professional challenges of working in the cooperative professional learning environment that now exists in schools. The Teaching Council’s proposals in its discussion document **Cosán** represent a significant opportunity for the teaching profession to embed a life-long learning approach in the professional lives of all teachers. All of this professional development will be necessary if teachers are to exploit fully the advantages of greater autonomy over areas such as curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. Indeed, in some countries, teachers, like members of other professions, are required to undertake a minimum level of ongoing professional development as a condition of their registration.
Accountability:

9. Schools could be required to provide more frequent and more comprehensive information to parents through written reports and parent-teacher meetings.

10. The requirements regarding school self-evaluation could be strengthened. Schools could be required to ensure that the school self-evaluation reports contain adequate detail about school progress and achievements in relation to curriculum delivery. The use of these could be restricted to evaluation and reporting within the school and its board if other means of to enhance reporting to parents are developed.

11. Schools could be required to report publicly on a number of issues annually. These could include public confirmation that the school is compliant with a number of key regulations (number of days opening for instruction, length of the school day, class size and deployment of teaching resources, admission policy, child protection policy and procedures, etc.). This could complement the provision of greater public access to information about the resources available to the school including, for example, total staffing resources available to the school, how these are deployed and the school’s effective pupil/teacher ratios, targeted resources available to the school and how these are used (for special education needs, DEIS, etc.) and financial income from the state. Consideration could also be given to making available certain information on the learning achievements of students, such as trend data from examinations or tests, such as at the end of second-level schooling. The mechanism by which this could be achieved and the resource implications involved would require further study.

12. The development of new inspection models for school inspections should continue and there should a growth in the range of inspection reports that are published. These changes could include specific inspection models to evaluate curriculum provision, shorter notice periods and further unannounced inspection models, follow-up inspections and reporting on a widely publicised scale of performance. Further national analyses of data could be compiled and published.

13. Consideration could be given to the introduction of development and performance management systems for teachers and principals. Detailed work would be required to establish how systems could be trialled and introduced that would provide a structured way in which boards of management and principals could review the work and development needs of principals on a regular basis. Work would also be required to trial and develop systems whereby principals could review the work and development needs of teachers in a structured, regular way. A key aim of this work would be to ensure that these systems encouraged meaningful professional conversations about the work and performance of principals and teachers and that they supported and encouraged ongoing professional development and improvement.
3.3 Budgets and funding

In relation to budgetary autonomy, the situation for schools in Ireland is mixed. School finances in Ireland are made up of three main elements, capital funding (land and buildings), salaries (teachers and other staff) and non-pay funding. Schools have varying levels of autonomy across these elements.

Traditionally, all capital works were managed centrally by the Department in order to ensure cost and quality control. However, in more recent years, there has been a greater devolution of autonomy for capital works to individual schools. Nevertheless, schools still have comparatively little autonomy in managing funding for major capital projects, such as new school builds. For smaller scale capital works, schools have a greater degree of autonomy, particularly in relation to relatively new schemes like the Summer Works Scheme, Additional Accommodation Scheme, Emergency Works Grants and the Minor Works grant. While funding comes directly from central government, the local school authority has discretion to some extent to prioritise needs and allocate resources accordingly.

Teacher salaries are negotiated centrally by the Government and these are the pay scales that must be applied by all approved schools. Schools have no real autonomy in this regard and are bound to comply fully with public pay policy. In addition, the make-up of the staff in the school (the numbers of teachers, promoted teachers, resource and learning support teachers and the number of special needs assistants) is determined centrally by the Department of Education and Skills and allocated annually to the school, based mainly on student numbers. In contrast, to date in the majority of schools, salaries for school secretaries and caretakers have been funded from the ancillary services grant and the level and extent of services provided have been a matter for the school authorities. However, the Department engaged in an arbitration process regarding the pay of school secretaries and caretakers. The Arbitrator’s recommendations are now being considered by the parties and the minister’s intention is to accept the Arbitrator's recommendations, subject to their acceptance by the union side. If accepted, this would limit the discretion individual schools have to apply diverse arrangements for secretarial and caretaking services.

Schools have more autonomy in regard to non-salary costs. A range of grants including capitation payments are paid to schools to cover their non-pay day-to-day costs, such as utility bills, insurance and classroom materials. The school authority has a high degree of autonomy in managing these funds according to the needs of the school and local circumstances. However, it must be recognised that almost all of the school management authorities have stated repeatedly in recent years that the level of funding provided by the Department for non-salary costs is inadequate and that they rely on fund-raising to supplement this income. Under Circular 48/2009, Boards of Management are entitled to consider the separate grants they receive, for example, capitation grants and book grants, to be a common grant that they can use according to their school’s priorities.
Options in relation to extending schools’ autonomy over their budgets and funding include the following:

**Capital works:**
1. The autonomy already given to schools to manage small scale capital works should be **continued**. However, it does not appear feasible or wise to attempt to give individual schools autonomy over the management of large scale capital works. Given the limited budget available; the need to prioritise spending; the complexity of major multi-million capital projects, and the limited technical expertise of school boards and the need to adhere to public procurement guidelines, it is not clear whether school boards as currently constituted or principals would have the capacity to engage any further with planning and managing capital projects.

The option of giving each school an annual capital grant is not feasible. It would not allow capital spending to be targeted to those schools most in need of investment and, in effect, the Government would end up borrowing capital sums that would be held as funds on deposit in many schools where capital expenditure is not required.

**Non-teacher/ non-SNA pay grants:**
2. Consideration could be given to rolling up current non-teacher/non-SNA pay grants into one overall grant and giving school authorities the autonomy to manage these resources in line with their own priorities.

**Teacher and SNA pay:**
3. Currently, all teachers are paid using either a single national payroll or through a payroll operated for the ETBI sector. This arrangement brings with it many of the advantages associated with large-scale shared services and has also proven to be an important mechanism to assist with the regulation of the teaching profession by the Teaching Council. It does not seem feasible or desirable to alter this arrangement. Teachers are also paid using nationally agreed pay scales. Similarly, SNAs are paid using nationally agreed salary scales, so it is unlikely to be feasible to grant schools autonomy over the salary levels of teachers or SNAs.

**Accountability:**
4. Any move to devolve greater budgetary autonomy to schools would create a requirement for **substantial investment in the development of skills in the management of such resources.**

5. A further requirement is for the **development of mechanisms to ensure that schools account for such resources.** In particular, systems would have to be developed and put in place to guard against fraud and misuse of resources, while also evaluating how such resources are being used and whether their management is contributing to improved educational outcomes. Education and Training Boards already have internal audit arrangements in place and these arrangements, or those of the Financial Support Services Unit (FSSU) which carries out an analogous role in voluntary secondary schools, may
provide a model for the kind of support mechanism envisioned in terms of accountability, transparency and financial responsibility for State funds.

6. The administrative burden of the development of, and compliance with, such systems would have to be offset against the benefits of this element of autonomy.

3.4 What would we need to do to make sure autonomy works?

In suggesting the possibilities outlined above, we have considered the current context of the Irish school system; the desirability of achieving the intended impacts of greater autonomy, and the likelihood of successful implementation in order to find the right balance between competing objectives and principles. Our review of the international literature and experience has resulted in some key messages:

1. **The devolution of decision-making power to schools must be in circumstances where it is clear that there is the local will.** At present, Ireland has a relatively homogenous system and there is a high level of trust in that system. Parents value the consistency across schools which supports equity of access to education and equality of opportunity in schools. Moving too quickly on autonomy will put at risk that faith in the system and could lead to demands for the provision of costly alternatives or outright opposition and mobilisation of parents at local and national levels, particularly where perceptions could develop around inequity of treatment.

   There is a strong sense of ownership at local level of the local school. The research indicates that autonomy is successful where the exercise of local authority to manage schools is largely a local choice. Where implementation planning does not provide adequate time to build a desire for greater autonomy across all stakeholders, the risk is that parents will react defensively, seeing autonomy as a divesting by central government of its responsibilities rather than as an empowering initiative.

   The research also shows that teachers can be suspicious of the contribution increased autonomy can make to improved students outcomes and enhanced working conditions, particularly where they perceive the pattern of autonomy to have been imposed on them rather than negotiated through professional engagement.

2. **An important element in ensuring the success of any programme of devolving autonomy is to ensure that the capacity exists to manage the new responsibilities.** In the absence of the necessary expertise within the school, there are real risks of mismanagement, leading to a deterioration in educational outcomes and a loss of administrative efficiency. The requisite skills and structures cannot be built in the short-term and to proceed to devolve decision-making authority in their absence is ill-advised.

3. **Adopting an incremental approach to developing school autonomy is the appropriate approach.** This paper has described how work is already underway in the Irish school system that can build the appropriate supports to develop autonomy and to empower schools to take on the challenges of self-direction and self-evaluation (see especially section 1.5). Section 2
has also indicated where potential exists for the further development of school autonomy and has described the sort of infrastructure needed to support autonomy in schools.

We know that there are risks associated with advancing school autonomy in the Irish school system. These risks are capable of being managed and the capacity to ensure that they do not threaten the system can be developed. For example, by developing system capacity and robust accountability mechanisms we can mitigate the risks associated with greater autonomy, and ensure that its benefits can be delivered across the system.

The table below summarises the range of actions that we could take to increase autonomy in the Irish school system and the supports and accountability measures needed to make a move to greater autonomy possible.
### Section 3.5: Options for advancing School Autonomy – possible actions, supports required and accountability measures

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<th>DIMENSION</th>
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<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Phase 3</th>
<th>SUPPORT(S) required</th>
<th>ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES</th>
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<td>Governance, Management and Ethos</td>
<td>Reform and consolidate the regulation of schools</td>
<td>Advancing work to achieve diversity of school patronage</td>
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<td>Strengthen the work of boards of management to ensure capacity to and accountability for management of schools</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reform and consolidate the regulation of schools</td>
<td>Advance Parent and Student Charter – strengthen parent participation in schools through specific provision in Charter</td>
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<td>Build the capacity of parents to engage with schools - targeted support for parent representatives on boards of management</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reform and consolidate the regulation of schools</td>
<td>Advance Parent and Student Charter – strengthen parent participation in schools through specific provision in Charter</td>
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<td>Increased frequency of external school inspections</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reform and consolidate the regulation of schools</td>
<td>Complete pilot of new model for the allocation of support teaching resources</td>
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<td>Development of new inspection models</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reform and consolidate the regulation of schools</td>
<td>Extend practice to create single allocation of posts in DEIS schools</td>
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<td>Publication of national analyses of school data</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reform and consolidate the regulation of schools</td>
<td>Extension of ‘single pot’ allocation approach to all schools</td>
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<td>More frequent and comprehensive reporting to parents - Extend the range of issues on which SSE reporting is required and the level of detail to be expected</td>
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<td>Reform and consolidate the regulation of schools</td>
<td>Advance the work currently underway in establishing robust school self-evaluation processes</td>
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<td>Principal and teacher development and performance systems</td>
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<td>Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment</td>
<td>Revise curriculum specifications – a broad set of learning outcomes; principles for planning and assessment</td>
<td>Provide flexibility to primary principals re deployment of teachers</td>
<td>Give schools discretion re subject offerings and allocation of time to subjects</td>
<td>Investment in NCCA syllabus committees at both levels</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Revise curriculum specifications – a broad set of learning outcomes; principles for planning and assessment</td>
<td>Provide flexibility to primary principals re deployment of teachers</td>
<td>Give schools discretion re subject offerings and allocation of time to subjects</td>
<td>Progress work currently underway to build professional competence of school leaders</td>
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<td>Revise curriculum specifications – a broad set of learning outcomes; principles for planning and assessment</td>
<td>Implement curriculum changes at junior cycle</td>
<td>Give schools discretion re subject offerings and allocation of time to subjects</td>
<td>Mandate minimum level of ongoing professional development for teachers</td>
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<td>Revise curriculum specifications – a broad set of learning outcomes; principles for planning and assessment</td>
<td>Implement curriculum changes at junior cycle</td>
<td>Give schools discretion re subject offerings and allocation of time to subjects</td>
<td>Enhance the support available from a middle management level in schools</td>
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<td>Revise curriculum specifications – a broad set of learning outcomes; principles for planning and assessment</td>
<td>Implement curriculum changes at junior cycle</td>
<td>Give schools discretion re subject offerings and allocation of time to subjects</td>
<td>Audit programme for all schools – robust financial management and reporting requirements on schools</td>
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<th><strong>Action</strong></th>
<th><strong>Support(S) required</strong></th>
<th><strong>Accountability Measures</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Reform and consolidate the regulation of schools</td>
<td>Strengthen the work of boards of management to ensure capacity to and accountability for management of schools</td>
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<td>Advance Parent and Student Charter – strengthen parent participation in schools through specific provision in Charter</td>
<td>Build the capacity of parents to engage with schools - targeted support for parent representatives on boards of management</td>
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<td>Complete pilot of new model for the allocation of support teaching resources</td>
<td>Institute and fund measures to enhance the skills of school leaders</td>
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<td>Extend practice to create single allocation of posts in DEIS schools</td>
<td>Increase inspection resources to support accountability measures</td>
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<td>Extension of ‘single pot’ allocation approach to all schools</td>
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<td>Advance the work currently underway in establishing robust school self-evaluation processes</td>
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<td>Provide flexibility to primary principals re deployment of teachers</td>
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<td>Implement curriculum changes at junior cycle</td>
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<td>Extend the range of state examinations at the end of Senior Cycle to allow for the inclusion of a greater range of qualifications including vocationally oriented qualifications.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give schools discretion re subject offerings and allocation of time to subjects</td>
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<td>Continue arrangement re schools’ management of small scale capital works</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consolidate non-teacher/non-SNA pay grants into one grant and give schools authority to manage these resources</td>
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<td>Give schools flexibility to employ either additional teacher or SNA resources to support children with SEN.</td>
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<td>Develop relevant ICT systems to monitor schools’ use of funds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establish audit function within Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audit programme for all schools – robust financial management and reporting requirements on schools</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4. **Next steps: What do you think?**

A template [Submissions Form](#) has been created and can be [downloaded from the Department’s website here](#).

Submissions should be emailed to: autonomyconsultation@education.gov.ie

If you prefer, the form is also printable and can be filled in hard copy and posted to:

- Autonomy Consultation
- Central Policy Unit
- Department of Education and Skills
- Marlborough Street, Dublin 1

Submissions should be received before close of business on **29 January 2016** at the latest.