

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Advancing School Autonomy  
in the Irish School System  
Research Paper**

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# Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System

## 1.1 Introduction

### 1.1.1 The purpose of this paper

This research and discussion paper provides a review of current research on school autonomy. It is intended to inform consultation on, and consideration of, a range of options for advancing the autonomy of state-funded primary and post-primary schools in Ireland. It is written as a partner paper to the *Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System Consultation Paper*, published by the Department of Education and Skills in November 2015. This research paper has been prepared in response to a number of commitments contained in the Programme for Government 2011-2016 in relation to increasing the autonomy of schools. The paper sets out a number of practical options for increasing that autonomy. Those options are informed by a consideration of the research on school autonomy, existing levels of school autonomy in Ireland, and the feasibility of a range of possible options for advancing that autonomy. Some of these options are already underway, others will require further exploration and thought.

Increasing the autonomy of schools generally involves decentralising decision-making to schools, enabling them to make a greater number of decisions about 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.

The options presented in this paper are designed to set out a number of ways in which the school autonomy objectives of the Programme for Government 2011-2016 could be advanced. In putting forward those options, consideration has been given to the following issues:

- 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
- The current educational and cultural context of the Irish school system

### 1.1.2 Understanding the context

All decision-making with regard to school autonomy has to have regard to the context in which schools operate. Dimensions of that context that are particularly important in this regard are: school size, leadership and staffing of schools, and the recent developments in

respect of curriculum and school self-evaluation. Due account must be taken of such factors in deciding policy regarding greater autonomy for schools.

### **School size**

Schools in Ireland at both primary and post-primary levels can differ significantly in terms of their size. Many primary schools are small; statistics for the school year 2012-2013 showed that almost 42% of primary schools had fewer than 100 pupils. Indeed, a total of 598 state-funded primary schools had fewer than 50 pupils. While post-primary schools are generally much larger than primary schools, they can nonetheless also vary significantly in terms of size.

### **Leadership and staffing of schools**

In recent years, large numbers of primary and post-primary principals and teachers have retired and there are now many newly appointed principals and deputy principals in schools at both levels. Further, while the majority of middle management posts available in schools 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.

### **Curriculum developments**

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is working on revisions to the primary curricula for languages and the first elements of those revised curricula will be introduced in schools in 2015. At post-primary level, Junior Cycle reform that involves schools devising short courses and conducting school-based assessment has commenced.

### **School self-evaluation**

School self-evaluation has recently been introduced at both primary and post-primary levels. Through the school self-evaluation process, schools are required to examine how well they are doing in terms of the education they are providing for their students and the quality of their students' learning, and to use that information to plan for improvement. This process involves schools gathering and analysing information, reporting on school strengths and areas for development, and setting out targets and action plans for improvement. Schools are at varying stages of development in respect of the school self-evaluation process.

## 2. School autonomy

### 2.1 Defining autonomy

School autonomy involves the freeing of schools from centralised and bureaucratic control or, put simply, the decentralising of decision-making to schools. Examples of the varying definitions of school autonomy to be found in the literature include:

- *The concept of school autonomy is related to schools' ability to self-determine relevant matters, such as objectives and activities to be conducted. It refers to domains such as governance, personnel, curriculum, instructional methods, disciplinary policies, budgeting, facilities and student admission (Agasisti et al, 2013)*
- *School autonomy is a form of school management in which schools are given decision-making authority over their operations, including the hiring and firing of personnel, and the assessment of teachers and pedagogical practices (Arcia et al, 2011)*

The power to make decisions can be decentralised to schools themselves, parents, communities, local authorities, patrons, or a combination of all of these. Within a school, the transfer of decision-making power can be to the principal of the school, the teachers, and, in some cases, even the students.

### 2.2 Degrees of autonomy

As the literature on school autonomy shows, schools can be autonomous to varying degrees regarding different areas of their work and operation. One useful categorisation of degrees of autonomy is the following:

- Schools are considered to be *fully autonomous*, or to have a high degree of autonomy, if they are fully responsible for their decisions subject to legal constraints or the general framework of education legislation.
- Schools are *partly autonomous* if they take decisions within a set of pre-determined options or require approval for decisions from their regional or national education authority.
- Autonomy may also be *implied* where there is an absence of rules or regulations in a given area (Eurydice, 2007).

### 2.3 Dimensions of autonomy

A review of the research and related literature shows that different frameworks are used by researchers and writers in their analysis of and reporting on dimensions of school autonomy. For example:

- Agasisti et al (2013), in examining the difference between formal and real school autonomy in the Italian educational system, use a conceptual framework for school autonomy that has three main dimensions:
  - *Governance* (with special reference to governing bodies)
  - *School climate* (relationship between principal and teachers)
  - *Accountability* (openness towards accountability and transparency)
- In *School Autonomy in Europe: Policies and Measures* (Eurydice, 2007), the notion of school autonomy is considered with reference to funding and human resources.
- In the analysis of school autonomy in publicly funded schools in England, *School Autonomy in England* (Eurydice, 2007), autonomy is considered with regard to mission, character, ethos, allocation of resources, staffing, curriculum and assessment, pupil admissions, behaviour management.
- Gunnarsson et al (2009), in their study of primary schools in 10 Latin-American countries, regard school autonomy as the power accorded to the local school administration to make decisions relating to matters such as curriculum, evaluation, school maintenance, hiring and firing personnel.
- Hanushek et al (2011), in their analysis of school autonomy with reference to data from the four waves of international PISA tests spanning 2000-2009, create, on the basis of the correlation between variables, three categories of autonomy: academic-content autonomy, personnel autonomy and budget autonomy.

Drawing from the range of frameworks used in the literature for categorising dimensions of school autonomy, and in light of the proposals in the Programme for Government 2011-2016, the following categorisation of dimensions of autonomy is used in this paper to guide the discussion:

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

## **2.4 Rationale for school autonomy**

Historically, school autonomy developed in Europe during the 19th century as a way to ensure academic freedom, a goal justified by religious and philosophical considerations that continued to hold well beyond the first half of the 20th century (Eurydice, 2007; Arcia et al, 2011). The aims of increasing autonomy vary and have included those of:



- *Achieving school and local democracy*
  - Greater school autonomy was linked to moves for greater democratic participation in education, including the desire to involve the local community and parents in the running of schools
  - In Nordic countries, school autonomy was connected with the process of political decentralisation which saw local councils rather than central government become major players in school management
  
- *Decentralising and improving the working of state machinery*
  - Decentralising responsibilities to local communities and school autonomy became strongly linked on the basis that placing the customer at the centre of state activities and eroding a public sector mentality would increase the efficiency and responsiveness of public services (Eurydice, 2007)
  - It is argued that education systems are extremely demanding of the managerial, technical, and financial capacity of governments, and, thus, as a service, education is too complex to be efficiently produced and distributed in a centralised fashion (King and Cordeiro-Guerra, 2005; Montreal Economic Institute, 2007)
  - Some research has shown that schools that have greater control over the use of their financial resources are more likely to have a supply of the resources they want to use (OECD 2005)
  
- *Improving the quality of education*
  - School autonomy is now seen by some commentators largely as a tool to be used to improve the quality of education (Eurydice, 2007). This perspective is based on opinions such as:
    - 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 radical changes to their teachers or staff
  - Essentially, where decisions about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, together with the authority to hire, develop and reward good teachers, are located at local level, it is likely that the school's ability to provide what is needed by students and their families will increase (Chubb and Moe, 1990). Further, it is argued by some advocates of autonomy that greater autonomy will promote innovation and change (Lubienski, 2003; Wohlstetter et al., 1995)
  - However, the literature is ambivalent about whether increased autonomy has a positive impact on the quality of student outcomes, as the evidence is very mixed (Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission 2013 provides a useful summary of the evidence)

## 3. The Programme for Government 2011-2016

### 3.1 Increasing school autonomy

The Programme for Government 2011-2016 envisages the following changes in respect of the work and management of schools:

- 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

### 3.2 Rationale for increasing school autonomy

The decentralising of decision-making to schools and local communities 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, fundamentally, improving the quality of the education offered to students. These are evident, for example, in the Programme’s concern with:

- Improving national education standards as reflected in:
  - The longer-term aim of positioning Ireland in the top ten performing countries in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)
  - The ambition of “building a knowledge society”
  - The more immediate objective of reviewing junior and senior cycle provision at post-primary level in order to “encourage greater innovation and independent learning.” (Programme for Government 2011-2016)
- Providing “choice and voice” for public service users: *Rather than giving fixed budgets to traditional public service providers...we will put resources into the hands of citizens to acquire services that are tailored to better suit their needs and less expensive for the taxpayer* (Programme for Government 2011-2016)
- The giving of new freedoms to public service bodies “to adapt work practices to local staff and customer needs” (Programme for Government 2011-2016)

### 3.3 Developing accountability

#### The link between autonomy and accountability

In much of the literature the understanding of autonomy is closely linked to accountability. In

this literature, there is widespread adoption of a perspective that sees evaluation and assessment arrangements as key to both improvement and accountability in school systems (OECD, 2013B). This can take a variety of forms:

- Public reporting, which includes, for example, the publication of information such as that from school inspection reports, school annual reports, and system-level reports providing an assessment of the state of education
- Evaluation and assessment results are increasingly used to reward or sanction the performance of individual school agents. This goes alongside the expansion of school external evaluation and the development of systems to review the work and development needs of principals and teachers. A number of countries have systems whereby either schools, school leaders or teachers receive rewards for good performance or are the subject of sanctions for underperformance (OECD, 2013B).

For example, in the context of the UK where the powers of academy schools to run their own affairs are extensive, these schools operate within a framework of accountability that has the following elements:

- A system of monitoring, evaluation and professional challenge provided by parties outside the school such as School Improvement Partners, Ofsted (the Inspectorate of Schools), Local Authorities and Regional School Commissioners
- A range of powers of intervention available to Local Authorities and the Education Minister when a school becomes a cause for concern (Eurydice, 2007)
- A system of school governance in which schools are accountable for their performance through a governing body which includes parents, staff and representatives of the local community
- The provision of information to parents and the wider community.

### **Accountability and the Programme for Government**

Alongside its proposals for changing certain decision-making responsibilities regarding education delivery, 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.

## **4. School governance, management and ethos: Options for consideration**

### **4.1 Defining governance, management and ethos**

Broadly interpreted, governance refers to the ownership, organisation and management of schools. Both formal and informal governance structures provide the vehicle through which power is deployed in organisations, including schools (Trimmer, 2013). Ethos, or the characteristic spirit of a school, as it is termed in the legislation, refers to the values or principles promoted by a school.

Structures and systems of school governance can vary considerably in terms of the level of autonomy given to schools with regard to their ownership, management and organisation. History, culture, law, administrative regulation and government policy are some of the factors that can influence how and where a school is situated in governance systems and structures. Ethos can also vary considerably.

### **4.2 Advantages and disadvantages of increased autonomy over governance, management and ethos**

Arguments advanced for and against greater autonomy for school communities in relation to governance include the following:

- More locally accountable governance in schools makes schools more responsive to parents
  - It can be argued that, in addition to making governance structures more democratic, decentralisation of control may result in better monitoring of teachers and schools by parents and local communities (Galliani et al 2008) where there is real engagement with parents at the governance level. The assumption is that such oversight focusses attention on teaching behaviours and learning outcomes
  - Gunnarsson and Orazem (2009) found that schools that are better equipped and with more involved parents have better outcomes.
- Giving schools more autonomy over staffing allows schools to select teachers best suited to their needs and the needs of students
  - In the case of some US and Australian states that have considerable freedoms in relation to school staffing, arguments are made by some researchers that schools are best placed to identify the staffing patterns and job descriptions which will result in the best outcomes for students

- It is also suggested by some commentators in US and Australian contexts that the flexibility to incentivise better student outcomes will generate greater teacher effort.
- More autonomy can lead to more vocal parents having undue influence on schools
  - Gunnarsson and Orazem (2009) highlight that autonomy can give rise to undue pressure being brought to bear on local managers by those parents who have influence. This means that the role of principal can become more politicised and, as a result, more stressful by virtue of having to satisfy multiple stakeholders, each exerting influence
  - Autonomy can result in schools providing an education which is shaped by the wishes of those who are most vocal, and who may not actually be representative of the entirety of the school population.
- Devolving management responsibility to schools means schools need more supports and resources
  - Many commentators refer to additional risks in relation to governance issues, including challenges arising from inability to engage wholly with the requirements of autonomy without very significant support, meaning that schools fall back on supporting central agencies
  - With the removal of higher-level agencies, which act as a type of bulwark in relation to a range of management and administrative issues, there is a significantly greater weight of work and of expectation falling on schools, and this requires significant additional resourcing to ensure that schools can cope capably.

### **4.3 Autonomy over governance, management and ethos in other jurisdictions**

#### **The UK**

In the UK, the government has actively encouraged existing schools to become more autonomous. Academies are publicly funded schools which operate outside of local authority control, whilst free schools are schools set up by groups of parents, teachers, charities, trusts, and religious and voluntary groups. In practice, there is little to differentiate between them, as free schools are set up as academies and are funded in the same way, directly from central government. They enjoy the same autonomies described below.

The academy system has been in operation in the UK for more than 13 years. As of 01 February 2014 there are 3,657 academies operating in the UK and 216 schools in the sponsorship process, which precedes, but does not assure, conversion to academy status, usually in the case of schools perceived as failing. There are approximately 24,200 schools, primary and post-primary, operating in the UK. This means that academy schools represent,

by number, approximately 15% of the total school cohort. Schools cannot acquire or remove their faith character, expand, become mixed or single sex, or introduce selection as part of the conversion process. Once converted, academies are run by an academy trust, which is a charitable company limited by guarantee. There are some examples of multi-academy trusts in operation.

In the UK, state-funded schools fall in the majority of instances under the control of the local authority. With a change to academy status this control relationship is changed and an academy no longer falls under the remit of the local authority. In effect, its locus of control changes to central government. More recently, the establishment of eight regional school commissioners (RSCs) is designed to provide additional oversight for academies and free schools. RSCs are responsible for approving new academies and intervening in underperforming academies and free schools in their area.

Academies which are free schools are governed by non-profit charitable trusts. An academy has the ability to set terms and conditions, including salary, for its staff at all levels and grades. This authority extends to the academy not being bound by national collective agreements, centrally negotiated trade union agreements, common salary scales or any other agreements, saving those which are mandated by legislation.

The local authorities tend to provide an array of ancillary and support services, such as behaviour support services. These are somewhat akin to some of the services provided in Ireland by agencies such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), TUSLA (the Child and Family Agency) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). When a school converts to academy status it must provide for itself all of the services which had previously been provided by the local authority. Finally, conversion to academy status awards ownership of the grounds and buildings to the school, and it also results in additional financial and legal compliance and reporting responsibilities for the school and its governors.

Academies and free schools can set the terms and conditions for their employees and this means that individual negotiation prevails. As a result, teachers' and other school employees have their rates of pay and their terms and conditions of employment determined by each academy on an individual basis. Concerns have been raised in the UK about the effect of this on employee morale. By way of balance, there is some merit to enabling individual pay rates as it means that individuals who make an outstanding contribution may be rewarded. There is also a concern that academies seek to employ younger or unqualified teachers, where they would be able to offer lower rates of pay, and thus retain more of the funding allocation for the school by lowering costs. (It is noted that a similar concern has arisen in the context of autonomous schools in some Australian states). In 2012, the Secretary of State for Education allowed academies to employ unqualified individuals as teachers if the academy believed that the person could perform in the role of teacher. The move was intended to foster innovation

and flexibility but it has met with stern opposition from political parties, as well as parent and teacher groups.

### The Netherlands

Citizens in the Netherlands enjoy complete freedom to found schools and to determine the principles on which they are governed. This autonomy facilitates the formation of all kinds of schools of different political, pedagogical and religious affiliations and, as a result there are publicly and privately run (or “independent”) schools. However, this autonomy is offset, where a school seeks funding by central government, by a requirement to meet a set of conditions set out in legislation. These include quality standards, prescriptions on the subjects to be studied, teachers’ qualifications, requirements regarding parental consultation and planning and reporting obligations. All schools are also subject to supervision and inspection.

Schools must report to a school board which is the legal manager or owner of the school. The school board is the main stakeholder at the school level. It has responsibility for school operations and school performance. It can hire and fire teachers. Every school in the Netherlands, whether public or private, reports to its school board which may oversee one or more schools depending on its mandate. In the last 30 years in the Netherlands there has been a gradual move towards more parent-teacher interaction and parents in many schools have begun to participate on advisory councils to school boards. Parent advisory councils to boards of governors also now exist.

### Finland

One of the basic principles of Finnish education is that all people must have equal access to high-quality education and training; the same opportunities for education should be available to all citizens irrespective of their ethnic origin, age, wealth or where they live.

The national education administration is organised at two levels. Education policy is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture. A national agency, the Finnish National Board of Education, is responsible for the implementation of the policy aims. It works with the Ministry to develop educational objectives, content and methods for early childhood, pre-primary, basic, upper secondary and adult education. Local education administration is the responsibility of local authorities, most commonly municipalities or joint municipal authorities. These make the decisions on allocation of funding, local curricula and recruitment of personnel. The municipalities also have the autonomy to delegate the decision-making power to the schools. Typically the principals recruit the staff of their schools. Schools are responsible for practical teaching arrangements as well as the effectiveness and quality of the education they provide. There are, for example, no regulations governing class size and schools are free to determine how to group students.

Local authorities determine how much autonomy is passed on to schools. There is an expectation that there will be liaison between school boards, parents and the municipal body

within the context of shared educational aims and priorities. The schools have the right to provide educational services according to their own administrative arrangements and vision, as long as the basic functions, determined by law, are carried out. For example, in many cases budget management, acquisitions and recruitment are the responsibility of the school. As discussed further in Chapter 5, teachers have pedagogical autonomy. They can decide the methods of teaching as well as textbooks and materials.

### Victoria, Australia

Government schools in Victoria tend to have greater autonomy than in other jurisdictions. They are usually governed by school councils that are accountable to the Minister for Education. School councils comprise elected parents (must be more than one-third of members), education department representatives including the principal and other teachers (must be no more than one-third of members), and sometimes community members.

The responsibilities of a school council include establishing the broad direction and vision for the school, developing and updating school policies, and overseeing the use of school resources. The school principal is executive officer of the council, meaning that he or she is responsible for providing advice to the council and implementing its decisions. Autonomy is focused on three key areas: finance, staffing and facilities.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development sets, and provides guidance on, the framework within which schools operate. This includes a school's state-funded budget (based on characteristics of the student population), the classification structure and associated salary rates for teachers, other human-resource policies (such as for managing underperforming staff), curriculum guidelines, and requirements for managing finances and organising school councils. The Department also assists with the selection of principals and monitors school outcomes. Regional offices of the Department play an important role in advising schools on a wide range of issues, including school management, curriculum and learning, workforce planning, leadership, professional development and student wellbeing.

### Sweden

About 17% of lower secondary aged pupils in Sweden choose to attend privately run 'free' schools in Sweden. These schools were established in the early 1990s and they enjoy considerable autonomy regarding governance. Free schools were given freedom from local authority control, the ability to set their own pay and conditions for staff and freedoms around the delivery of the curriculum. It was hoped that this would lead to the creation of more specialisation in schools, greater variety and increased flexibility in the school system and thus increase freedom of choice for parents.

Most free schools have been established by for-profit providers who use a business model to direct governance and management of the school(s). The expected variety did not materialise and the majority of free schools adopt a more generalist approach to provision.



Free schools operate on the periphery of the Swedish school system as a whole and strategic matters in relation to the development of the Swedish education system have remained under central and local municipal responsibility through powerful instruments of control, financial resources, national curriculum and inspection (Wiborg 2010). Concern about falling levels of achievement in PISA for example have informed some rowing back on initial freedoms, specifically in relation to curriculum and assessment, such that Sweden has called into question its extensive school autonomy. Recently, Sweden's education minister, Jan Björklund, was quoted as saying that the Pisa 2012 results were "the final nail in the coffin for the old school reform [i.e. free schools]," and speculated that the central government could take over running schools from Sweden's municipalities (The Guardian, 03 December 2013). All schools are subject to inspection by both local and national authorities. PISA identifies school choice as a contributing factor to falling achievement levels in Sweden. Parents' right to choose between municipal schools and independent schools was intended to increase quality by competition, but it has also led to the best students flocking to the same schools (OECD 2014).

Concern about the impact of autonomy in regard to student selection and admission criteria has also been voiced by others. Böhlmark et al (2007) investigated whether the increased availability of private schools in the municipality has worsened school level segregation along the lines of parental income, education and immigration status. Their results show that more private schools tend to 'siphon away' from public schools children whose parents have higher education levels and who are not first-generation immigrants. This suggests that Swedish free-schools tend to enrol pupils not coming from the bottom tail of the ability distribution.

#### **4.4 School governance, management and ethos in Ireland**

##### **Context**

Schools in Ireland differ in terms of their size and governance arrangements. Statistics for the school year 2012-2013 show that there were 526,422 pupils and 32,175 teachers in 3,293 state-funded primary schools. Many of these schools are small with almost 42% of them having fewer than 100 pupils. (A total of 598 state-funded primary schools had fewer than 50 pupils.) At post-primary level, 362,874 students attended 721 second-level schools where they were taught by a total of 25,374 teachers. Those 721 second-level schools consisted of three types of school, each with a different governance structure: 375 voluntary secondary schools, 253 vocational (ETB) schools and 93 community and comprehensive schools.

Overall, 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.

## **Governance and management**

The respective roles of trustees, patrons, owners, boards of management and principals in school governance and management vary somewhat across the sectors. With a small number of exceptions, primary schools are privately owned. They are controlled by patron bodies and receive most of their funding from the Department of Education and Skills. Each school is individually managed by a board of management which is appointed by the patron and recognised by the Minister. The board is made up of representatives of the patron of the school, two elected parents, the principal, one elected teacher and two people from the local community. The board is appointed by the patron to serve for a fixed period and all members of the board serve in a voluntary capacity. The principal is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school and is accountable to the patron and the board.

At post-primary level, schools are also publicly funded but there are three different types of governance. Voluntary secondary schools are privately owned, are managed by a board of management and are controlled by trustees who are usually religious communities, bishops or boards of governors. Community schools are managed by boards of management representative of local interests. Trustees, who are the school patron, hold the property in trust for the Minister. Vocational schools and community colleges come under the aegis of Education and Training Boards (ETBs); they have boards of management which are legally sub-committees of the ETBs. In summary, in respect of governance and management, schools may be considered to be partly autonomous.

## **Management and legislation**

The Education Act 1998 and subsequent pieces of legislation and regulation underpinned the local management of schools by boards of management representative of parents, the schools' founding patrons, teachers and local communities. In this way, the Education Act 1998 reaffirmed a high degree of local control over individual schools. The Act also underpinned the rights and role of school patrons – bodies such as the denominational churches and private organisations such as Educate Together, An Foras Pátrúnacha and education trusts – to found and manage schools. (These bodies act in ways analogous to the role played by sponsoring trusts in Free Schools in England).

At both primary and post-primary levels, boards of management are obliged to ensure that each student in the school is provided with an appropriate education (section 15(1), Education Act 1998). Further, they are required to consult with the patron and keep the patron informed of their decisions and proposals (section 15(2)(c)).

Legislation ascribes to the Minister for Education and Skills responsibility for setting national education policy and, specifically, responsibility for curriculum policy; for making regulations regarding the appointment and qualifications of teachers; for evaluation and the inspection of schools; and for the policy framework within which the Teaching Council operates. However, as specified in the Education Act 1998, the Minister can only exercise his/her powers following consultation with the key stakeholders in the system, including national

school management bodies, national parent bodies, national associations of school principals, and teacher unions.

For some time, there has been relatively little investment by the State in the systematic development of 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.

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 set of current regulations for the school system is lacking and some regulations are outdated.

### **Ethos, patronage and legislation**

In all primary and post-primary schools, the school's stated ethos (or characteristic spirit as it is termed in the legislation) is decided by the owners or patrons/trustees of the school and not by central government. Autonomy over ethos does not exist at the level of the school board, principal or teachers. Indeed, one of the specific duties of a board is to uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school. Thus, depending on the unit of analysis, schools may be viewed as fully autonomous in respect of ethos, or partly autonomous if the unit of analysis is an individual school operating within a specific ethos.

While, as noted above, the operating rules for schools are largely set by the State, the ethos espoused by the trustees/ patrons can inform aspects of how those operating rules are acted upon in schools. For example, a denominational primary school may determine the content of its religious education curriculum on the basis of the school's religious ethos. It is important to highlight that choice of ethos in Ireland is an area in which there is much independence. There are no statutory barriers, or indeed other barriers to a person or group of people forming a school and seeking recognition from the Department of Education and Skills.

Recent developments have seen further democratisation in the area of school patronage as the Minister for Education and Skills in 2011 undertook a programme of consultation with parents which resulted in their views directly shaping the nature of the patronage arrangements, and consequent ethos, of schools for their local areas. 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 of teachers**

Schools have considerable autonomy in relation to the recruitment of teachers, although that discretion is bounded by requirements stemming from national redeployment arrangements. They also have some autonomy over the deployment of teachers to meet curriculum needs and other requirements. While boards do not pay teachers’ salaries, they (or the ETB in the case of ETB schools) are nonetheless deemed under the law to be the employers of the teachers in their schools. Under the Education Act 1998 and the Education (Amendment) Act 2012 boards have considerable autonomy in the disciplining of personnel up to and including dismissal.

Teachers’ terms and conditions in Ireland are not decided at school, board or patron/trustee level but by central government. This means that, in the Irish context, schools have no autonomy with respect to teachers’ terms and conditions of employment. Schools do not have discretion in relation to the number of teaching posts; these are allocated centrally in accordance with Government policy, other than for additional teachers employed privately by a school. Access to promoted posts of responsibility in school is regulated by circular.

## **4.5 The Programme for Government**

The Programme for Government 2011-2016 aims to increase, within the existing legislative framework, the autonomy that schools currently have over their governance, management and ethos. It proposes that:

- Parents and local communities will have more say in the patronage of schools
- Schools will have greater autonomy to set their own staffing needs
- Principals and boards will have increased freedom to allocate and manage staff.

## 4.6 Progress and developments

Significant progress has been made in relation to the Programme for Government commitments to increasing autonomy over school governance, management and ethos.

### **Forum on Patronage and Pluralism**

Recent developments have seen an increased role for the views of parents and communities in shaping the nature of the patronage arrangements, and consequent ethos, of schools for their local areas. Processes have been introduced to allow parents a significant say in determining the patronage of a school and in expressing the desire for changes in the patronage and ethos of existing schools. In 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills set up an expert group to consult with individuals and interest groups and make recommendations about how primary schools can become more inclusive. That expert group advanced proposals in relation to the reshaping of primary school provision so that it provides a sufficiently diverse number and range of primary schools catering for all religions and none (*Report of the Advisory Group to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, 2012*). Parents were engaged at the local level to gather their views on the form of education provision which they desire.

### **Parent and Student Charter**

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 set out principles that will guide, among other things how the local relationship between parents and schools can be developed.

### **School self-evaluation**

With the introduction of school self-evaluation in 2012, a mechanism is now in place that has the capacity to ensure that parents receive annual reports on the operation of their child's school. Experience in the early phases of the implementation of school self-evaluation demonstrates that schools find the provision of an annual report challenging. Nevertheless, by ensuring parents are meaningfully involved in school self-evaluation processes, and by providing reports to parents, a school can discharge its responsibilities in relation to the right of a parent to be informed on a regular basis about key issues regarding the effectiveness of the education being provided by the school at a general level.

### **Staffing**

Movement towards the Programme for Government's objective of increasing the autonomy of schools to 'set their own staffing needs' is evident in proposals that have been put forward by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and which is currently being piloted in 47 schools. This policy advice proposes that language support, learning support and resource teaching hours should be brought into a single pot of special educational needs (SEN) posts for schools, thereby giving schools greater discretion in how best to meet the needs of their students.

## **4.7 Increasing autonomy over school governance, management and ethos**

Some elements of current policy development and implementation in Ireland have the potential to advance school autonomy. These include, for example, the following:

### **Ethos and patronage**

The development of a technical or other platform which allows views regarding the patronage of schools to be gathered and which generates data about local needs at a national level could serve to support national policy, as well as giving an indication of trends as they change over time.

### **Parent and Student Charter**

The development of the Parent and Student Charter has the potential to support greater school autonomy by specifying, among other things, how the local relationship between parents and schools can be developed. Such a charter could help to formalise and disseminate expectations in respect of how a school reports to parents about the quality of education provision available to their children.

### **Parental participation on boards of management**

Consideration could be given to increasing parental representation on boards of management. This would build incrementally the capacity of parents to contribute in a more meaningful way to the management of a school. There are disadvantages associated with this option, however: it is already difficult to ensure that two elected parents take up the opportunity to serve on boards of management, and even if implemented, a higher degree of parental membership of the board will not guarantee an open and inclusive climate at the level of school management, and could result in divided boards and consequent delays in decision-making.

### **Parental ballots**

Giving parents the power to trigger ballots requiring boards of management to address their concerns is another option that could be explored. This would provide a formal recognition in the school system of parents as the primary educators of their children. It would empower parents to determine more directly how a school is managed and the development of the school's policy. However, the capacity of parents' association members to exercise this right is not established and this is a key disadvantage to this option.

### **The employment/deployment of teachers**

The Department of Education and Skills and Government should consider carefully an incremental approach to increasing the autonomy of schools regarding the deployment of teachers: Building on the NCSE policy advice regarding the provision of a single pot of posts to schools to meet SEN needs and the outcomes of the current pilot of this model of allocation, planning for moving further along this continuum could be considered. The next

step might be to consider the possibility of granting a single pot of posts to DEIS schools, which would amalgamate the DEIS-specific and SEN-specific posts. DEIS schools would then have discretion to deploy the allocated posts in accordance with identified school needs and priorities.

At a further stage, in the light of an evaluation over time of how successfully these changes contributed to the quality of outcomes for students in schools, a further possible option for consideration is the extension of a similar arrangement to all schools or to a sample of schools that are highly effective. Schools could receive a general staffing and support allocation with accompanying flexibility regarding class size and the organisation of students for learning activities in accordance with Department guidance. This could be done where capacity to manage this effectively has been indicated through, for example, the school's self-evaluation processes and inspection.

Finally, 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 special educational needs and DEIS 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.

Such measures would clearly accord with the Programme for Government's commitment to adapting work practices to local staff and customer needs (p.3) while also enabling schools to acquire services that are better tailored to suit the needs of their students (p.2).

## **4.8 Accountability considerations**

The research literature suggests that without good accountability mechanisms, greater autonomy can be detrimental for student performance (Hanushek, Link, and Wößmann 2011).

- Regarding their governance, management and ethos, schools have to comply with a number of accountability mechanisms. Patrons are encouraged to establish boards of management in accordance with Departmental regulations<sup>1</sup> and the boards of management may be required by their patron body to report on their governance of the school and how they have upheld the characteristic spirit of the school
- With the introduction of school self-evaluation, a mechanism is now in place that has the capacity to ensure that parents receive an annual report on the operation of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Education Act, 1998 encourages patrons to establish boards of management for each recognised school "where practicable". In the vast majority of cases, schools are managed by a board of management established by the patron, but in a small number of cases management structures that existed before the 1998 Act continue to be responsible for the governance of the school. In the case of all newly funded schools, the patron is required to establish a board of management as a condition of recognition.

school. In the roll-out phase of school self-evaluation, the reporting requirements have been deliberately limited and restricted to comment on improvements in teaching and learning and compliance with basis regulation. Over time, school self-evaluation has the potential to place a more onerous demand on the board of the school to account for its governance of the school

- The inspection of schools is a further mechanism of accountability in regard to governance and management. Already, whole-school type evaluations examine the operations of boards of management and the leadership of the principal within the existing range of responsibilities. Any progress on extending the autonomy of schools over the deployment of additional teaching resources (such as SEN resources as proposed by the NCSE or to the resources given to DEIS schools) should be linked to specific accountability requirements, including greater inspection measures. These could require the school to demonstrate to the Inspectorate that it is successfully fulfilling the requirement to provide high quality SEN support or effective use of DEIS resources, and the resulting published reports could describe specific levels of performance
- A move towards greater accountability poses challenges at both school and system levels. There are limitations to the engagement which schools and their principals and staffs can be expected to bring to accountability processes in a time when there has been an ever-increasing pace of change
- An additional school-level challenge derives from the fact that there is a need for schools to develop the competences which support robust accountability mechanisms. At the governance level, boards of management are composed of volunteers for the most part, and there is no assurance that the board will have the requisite skill-set to adopt and implement successfully accountability mechanisms, particularly in areas such as finance and budgeting
- In relation to system-level resourcing, all changes require resourcing to some degree. Introducing new accountability systems and processes would be dependent on the Department investing in supporting programmes/resources. The literature indicates that these are most efficient when they include a high level of individual support for schools. Such support is very resource intensive, especially in the Irish context of a large number of smaller schools.

#### **4.9 Options for consideration: school governance, management and ethos**

To further the aims of the Programme for Government with regard to increasing autonomy over school governance, management and ethos, consideration could be given to the options described below:



## **1. Ethos**

The work currently underway in reshaping primary school provision and providing greater diversity of school patronage could continue so that a sufficiently diverse number and range of primary schools is achieved.

## **2. Governance**

- The Parent and Student Charter currently under development could specify how the local relationship between parents and schools might 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

## **3. The employment/deployment of teachers**

- Careful consideration could be given to increasing the autonomy of schools regarding the deployment of teachers:
  - As a first step and following completion of the pilot, the implementation of proposals from the NCSE regarding the creation of a single pot of SEN-related teaching posts in schools, giving schools greater discretion in how best to meet the needs of their students, could be extended to all schools
  - If this first step is implemented successfully, consideration could 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
  - At a further stage, consideration could be given to extending a similar arrangement to all schools or to a sample of such schools that are highly effective.

## **4. Accountability**

Decentralising of decision-making to schools would create a greater need for the evaluation of schools, school leaders and teachers. Consideration could be given to:

- Advancing the work currently underway in establishing robust school self-evaluation processes. Experience in other countries has shown that school self-evaluation is most effective when it is primarily directed at improving teaching and learning rather than

when it is used as an accountability measure. For this reason, current policy is focussed on enabling schools to use school self-evaluation to drive internal improvement. Under current self-evaluation arrangements, schools are asked to provide an annual summary reports to parents about their priorities for improvement and their progress. To date, more than 60% of schools have already provided such reports, at least to their boards of management, with many schools also providing them directly to their Parents' Associations. 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 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. As school self-evaluation becomes embedded in schools, it will be possible to extend the range of issues on which reporting is required and the level of detail to be expected in self-evaluation reports and school improvement plans

- Advancing the programme of reform of external school inspection, improving further the reporting of the levels of performance of schools on a number of criteria
- Instituting 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.

## **5. Legislation and regulation**

- The Education Act affirms a high degree of local autonomy over school and some changes to the legislative framework have already been notified. (These include amendment of Section 28 of the Education Act to provide for Parents', Learners' and Schools Charter – see below).
- Regulatory arrangements are currently weaker than is required to support the complexity of an autonomous school system, and some regulations are outdated. **Reform of the regulation of schools** would be needed to professionalise elements of the management of schools and establish the appropriate mechanisms for devolved decision making and robust accountability

## **5. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment: Options for consideration**

### **5.1 Defining autonomy over curriculum, pedagogy and assessment**

Schools may be granted autonomy over the content of the curriculum that they teach (for example, whether discrete subjects or integrated themes are taught; the choice of subjects to be taught; the time devoted to individual subjects; and the knowledge and skills to be developed within curriculum areas). Schools may also have autonomy to decide the approaches, methodologies and teaching resources that they use and to determine and carry out any form of student assessment.

### **5.2 Advantages and disadvantages of increased autonomy over curriculum, pedagogy and assessment**

Arguments advanced for and against greater autonomy for schools in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment include the following:

- Individual schools know best about the needs of their students and can make better decisions regarding the curriculum they offer to students
  - Decentralising decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and staffing to schools themselves or to another local body is frequently associated by advocates of school autonomy with improving learning outcomes for students on the basis that those closest to schools know best how to meet the students' needs
- Failing schools can be improved more easily if schools have greater curricular flexibility
  - Arguments are advanced that schools in difficulty will improve if they have the flexibility to make necessary changes to their staffing and curriculum
- Giving schools autonomy over curriculum and pedagogy fosters innovation
  - Curriculum and pedagogical autonomy at school or local level is frequently seen by these advocates as a means of fostering innovation, creativity and change and a major factor in the success of some of the world's leading education systems
  - Some research, largely arising from US Charter schools, has identified a number of practices that are effective in raising student attainment
- There is evidence that more autonomous schools are more selective regarding their student intake yet show no evidence of better student outcomes
  - Gibbons and Silva (2011), for example, suggest that although more autonomous schools tend to admit pupils with educationally advantageous backgrounds, there

- are no clear performance benefits from autonomous structures, irrespective of pupils' background
- Research based on US charter schools has yielded inconsistent results in terms of improving education standards. Toma and Zimmer (2012) have concluded that the existing literature is inconclusive about the aggregate effect charter schools have on student achievement.
  - The evidence about the beneficial effects of school autonomy over matters such as curriculum, pedagogy or assessment is limited
    - Gibbons et al. (2006) find that primary schools with autonomous governance respond to a greater degree of competition with other local schools by raising their pupils' achievements and that this effect is somewhat larger for pupils from disadvantaged background. Although the data is 'thin', this suggests that less able pupils may benefit from studying at more autonomous schools when these have to compete with other local institutions
    - While research has yet to establish a definitive link, several commentators on the Swedish educational system have noted the parallel between that country's moves towards school autonomy and significant declines in its students' outcomes in PISA
    - Evidence from the work of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research has shown that they cannot point to any great system-wide gains in student performance or learning, new approaches to learning, or greater equality of educational opportunity that have clearly arisen from school autonomy in that country.
  - A number of factors can impact on whether a school with autonomy over curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment is a successful school. These factors may be more important than the autonomy of the school, *per se*. (Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission 2013). They include:
    - the instructional leadership skills of the principal
    - the qualifications of teachers
    - the extent to which teachers engage in ongoing professional development
    - the accountability mechanisms in place (such as the mechanisms for reporting to parents and the publication of information on the effectiveness of the school).

### **5.3 Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment autonomy in other jurisdictions**

#### **The UK**

Academy and free schools in the UK are state-maintained but independently run schools set up with the help of outside sponsors. They are free of local authority control and have considerable autonomy over how they deliver a curriculum. However, they must:

- include English, maths and science
- include Religious Education, although the nature of this will depend on whether the school has a faith designation
- secure access to independent, impartial careers advice for pupils in years 9-11
- include sex and relationship education (SRE). (Source: <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/academies/open/b00219097/academyfactsheets/academycurriculumfactsheet>)

Academies are encouraged to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of the individual pupils in the school (Eurydice, 2007). In recent times in the UK, however, there has been political debate on whether academies and free schools should be obliged to teach from the national curriculum. While academies and free schools have the freedom to adapt the UK National Curriculum for their schools, it is often debated as to whether the outcome of the adaptation is actually beneficial, as it may result in a narrowing of students' curriculum experience. In June 2014, for example, the head of Ofsted, Michael Wilshaw, recommended that the UK government should provide much greater clarity to all schools, including academies and free schools, on what should be taught in a broad and balanced curriculum (The Guardian, 10 June 2014).

Equally, it is not at all clear that this autonomy necessarily results in improved outcomes for students. More recently, reviews of the academies have raised questions in relation to their effectiveness, with the latest finding that 44% of the academies analysed were below the government's new 'coasting' level of quality in 2014 (Hutchings et al, 2015).

Further, some researchers argue that increased parental choice and the availability of academy schools at post-primary level are associated with more polarization on academic and social grounds (Gibbons and Silva 2006).

### US Charter schools

US Charter schools are created through a contract, or "charter," between the operator of the school and the authoriser, which is typically a local school board. When first introduced in the United States in 1991, charter schools came with two distinct promises: to serve as an "escape hatch" for students in failing schools, and to create and incubate new educational practices.

Although they are required to have open admissions policies, charter schools are exempt from most of the other statutory requirements of traditional (non-charter) public schools, including requirements around spending, human capital, management, parental involvement in the educational process, curriculum and instructional practices, and even governance and management structures. As part of the charter, and in exchange for more autonomy to develop innovative curricula, pedagogy, and operational strategies, charter schools have greater accountability than traditional (non-charter) public schools for student performance, financial matters, and effective school operations. Public charter schools are required to meet all state and federal education standards. In addition, they are judged on how well they meet

student achievement goals established by their charter contracts. A quality public charter school must meet rigorous academic, fiscal and managerial standards.

When viewed as a whole, charter schools have yielded inconsistent results in terms of improving education standards. Toma and Zimmer (2012) have concluded that the existing literature is inconclusive about the aggregate effect charter schools have on student achievement, while others have drawn attention to the potential for a mismatch between the theory and practice of charter schools (Finnigan 2007). There is considerable divergence across charter schools in relation to how they operate. Generally, those charter schools which are most successful are those which serve less advantaged populations. Researchers, (for example, Fryer, 2012) have identified a number of educational practices evident in charter schools that are most effective in raising student achievement:

- Focusing on human capital (Teachers should be given the tools they need to succeed, including increased feedback from administrators)
- Frequent student assessments
- Collecting daily student performance data to reduce the time between “student deficiency diagnosis and treatment” (Fryer, 2012)
- Using student data to drive instruction (Data can drive more personalised and more efficient learning)
- A relentless focus on maths and reading achievement (Carter 2000, Thermstrom and Thermstrom 2004, Whitman, 2008)
- Providing “high-dosage” tutoring
- Dramatically increased instructional time
- Parental pledges of involvement
- Revised teaching practices, for example, the use of independent, project-based learning and blended learning that stresses differentiation and dynamic movement through work stations.

## Finland

Finland has excelled in PISA ratings consistently over the years. The reasons behind Finland’s success are complex because the evolved working parts within their system, framed within their cultural backdrop, complement each other very effectively. Those ‘working parts’ include recruitment, training and selection processes which emphasise teaching as a prestigious career (Westbury et al 2005), a requirement for all teachers to hold at least a Master’s degree and to engage in considerable state-funded continuing professional development, and considerable autonomy for both principals and teachers in regard to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

While the National Curriculum Framework for Basic School and similar documents for upper secondary education provide guidance to teachers, curriculum planning is the responsibility of schools and municipalities. The school-level curriculum is approved by local education authorities and teachers and school principals play a key role in curriculum design. It is

frequently asserted that the high investment in teachers' initial and continuing education is an essential element in enabling the Finnish system to devolve curriculum design to the level of the individual school. Teachers also play a key role in assessing students. Teacher-based assessments are used by schools to monitor progress and these are descriptive and used in a formative manner to inform feedback and assessment for learning. Students in Finland sit no mandatory examinations until the age of 17 to 19. Finnish schools do not use standardised testing to determine student success.

As noted above, it is not easy to identify causal relations between specific actions and student achievement in the Finnish schools. However, the freedom to design curriculum at the level of the classroom is likely to be highly relevant, in that the teacher, who is best placed to identify students' needs, can design and implement a bespoke programme of instruction to meet them. In addition, education policy in Finland gives a high priority to individualised education and creativity as an important part of how schools operate and there is a very high level of trust between parents and teachers. Further, teachers are highly qualified and engage in a considerable amount of ongoing professional development. All classes contain a mixture of ability levels, with most classes containing two or more teachers who focus on those needing additional support. The absence of standardised assessments means that the curriculum, teaching and learning drive teachers' practice in schools, rather than testing (Sahlberg 2010).

### Sweden

Sweden's free schools initially enjoyed full autonomy in matters relating to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. However, since 2008, policy-makers have implemented reforms which represent a move towards more strictly specified curricular content. Spurred by concerns about decreasing levels of achievement in PISA, and by inspection reports which indicate that goal-based curricula had become difficult for teachers to interpret and led to major inequalities in school academic requirements, autonomy over curriculum choice and student assessment has been lessened. Central government specifies the syllabuses for compulsory education and provide a range of tests from which schools may choose to measure student achievement.

The PISA 2012 results published on 03 December 2013 revealed that, over the past decade, average performance in Sweden declined in all three core subjects measured in PISA, reading, mathematics and science, from a level around or above the OECD average to a level below the average. Whilst it is not possible to establish a direct causal link between school autonomy in the dimension under discussion and outcomes for students, Dr Susanne Wiborg of London's Institute of Education argues that, "the Swedish free schools have played an indirect role in the decline of the PISA scores over the last decade" (The Guardian, Tuesday 03 December 2013). This may be because the wide variety in local interpretations of the curriculum which resulted from curricular autonomy created marked differences between schools and/or

because free schools in Sweden often have a preponderance of ‘tail’ students or students who are not achieving as well as those enrolled in state schools (Machin et al 2013).

### New Zealand

New Zealand has been a top PISA performer since 2000, with students performing above the OECD average in reading, science and mathematics. Schools in New Zealand are among the most autonomous across the OECD countries (OECD, 2013); they operate individually without being nested in districts or local authorities. Their autonomy makes them somewhat like US charter schools that are not part of a larger non-profit or for-profit organisation (Wylie, 2013). Teachers in New Zealand have much professional autonomy. While there is a National Curriculum, it is not highly specified - it provides a framework for the development of a school-based curriculum and sets out five key principles which are particularly relevant to the processes of curriculum planning, prioritising and review.

Teachers are expected to analyse students and their needs and to select teaching strategies and materials aligned with the National Curriculum. In addition, there are National Administration Guidelines which include requirements for schools to have a strategic plan with related annual plans and targets. Schools create their own plans and target within these parameters.

National standards have been set to clarify national expectations to guide teaching and learning in the classroom. Student assessment in New Zealand is developed internally by schools. Assessment in relation to national standards is underpinned by assessment for learning principles and practice. It relies on the professional judgements of teachers across a range of information, including day-to-day teaching and learning, and the use of nationally validated assessment tools. Students’ qualifications in upper secondary education are assessed internally and externally by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, based on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework.

As in the case of Finland, one cannot definitively ascribe the success of the New Zealand education system to the autonomy its schools have in relation to the curriculum they deliver and the way in which they deliver it or to their particular approach to assessment. Indeed, the head researcher at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research has written that New Zealand cannot point to any great system-wide gains in student performance or learning, new approaches to learning, or greater equality of educational opportunity that have clearly arisen from school autonomy (Wylie, 2009). What is clear, however, is that relatively high levels of school autonomy over matters of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, while nuanced differently in Finland and New Zealand, are features of two very successful education systems.



## 5.4 Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment autonomy: The importance of leadership

The educational successes of countries like Finland and New Zealand as well as the experience with some US charter schools and other autonomous school reforms has shown that granting schools more flexibility can yield more innovation in school management, staffing, and instruction (Dillon, 2011). As illustrated above, experiences of high-performing countries such as Finland and New Zealand strongly suggest that school or other local autonomy over curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are important factors in promoting innovation, creativity and high education standards. However, experience has also shown that not all schools have the capacity to fill the space created by autonomy with actions that actually improve student learning. Schools frequently do not have the leaders, the staff or the vision to make good independent decisions, and they frequently lack the ability to build that capacity. Without these, autonomy is unlikely to improve student achievement (Dillon, 2011; Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, 2013). This is clearly illustrated in the analysis of 26 published studies examining the relationship between types of school leadership and a range of academic student outcomes conducted by Professor Robinson (2007).

Robinson found that leaders in higher-performing schools are distinguished from their counterparts in otherwise similar lower-performing schools by their personal involvement in planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and teachers. Specifically, the leadership of higher-performing schools was distinguished by its active oversight and coordination of the instructional programme. School leaders and staff worked together to review and improve teaching – an idea captured by the concept of shared instructional leadership (Heck et al, 1990; Heck et al, 1991; Marks and Printy, 2003). In high performing schools, the leadership was more directly involved in coordinating the curriculum across year levels than in lower-performing schools. Further, the degree of leader involvement in classroom observation and subsequent feedback was also associated with higher-performing schools. Teachers in such schools reported that their leaders set and adhered to clear performance standards for teaching (Andrews & Soder, 1987; Bamburg and Andrews, 1991) and made regular observations that helped them improve their teaching (Bamburg & Andrews, 1991; Heck, 1992; Heck et al, 1990). In addition, there was greater emphasis in higher-performing schools on ensuring that staff systematically monitored student progress (Heck et al, 1990), and that test results were used for the purpose of programme improvement (Heck et al, 1991). Teachers' use of data to evaluate student progress, adjust their teaching, plan their weekly programme and give students feedback, was a strong indicator of school quality, and level of school quality had a significant influence on student achievement in reading and mathematics (Robinson, 2007).

## 5.5 Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment autonomy in Ireland

Schools in Ireland are partly autonomous in respect of the curriculum they teach, their pedagogy, and assessment.

### Curriculum and pedagogy

- While there is currently a centrally devised curriculum at both primary and post-primary levels, there is also much scope for teachers, within its parameters, to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the learners, particularly at primary level
- At post-primary level, while curriculum content has traditionally been largely determined by the syllabus of State examinations, this situation is now changing with the introduction of greater curriculum freedoms at Junior Cycle
- State-funded schools in Ireland are partly autonomous in respect of pedagogy. Schools and teachers have considerable scope to make decisions about the appropriate pedagogical approach for their students. At primary level, decisions about pedagogy 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 as at primary level, 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
- At both primary and post-primary levels, the selection of text books and classroom resources to support the implementation of the curriculum is made by schools, rather than by central government.

### Assessment

State-funded schools in Ireland are partly autonomous in respect of assessment. 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.

### Leadership

As illustrated above, possibilities for extending the autonomy of schools with regard to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment have implications for the leadership of schools. The development of school leaders as instructional leaders will be critical to realising in a fresh way the curriculum, pedagogical, and assessment autonomy that primary and post-primary schools in Ireland currently have and may be given in the future. Work already underway

through the establishment of the national Centre for School Leadership to examine the qualifications, training and support of school leaders provides the context within which concerns about the required leadership capacity can be addressed.

## 5.6 The Programme for Government

A fundamental objective of the education provisions of the Programme for Government 2011-2016 is the raising of education standards through curriculum reform in order to ‘improve attainment in literacy, mathematics and science and to encourage greater innovation and independent learning’. The Programme articulates a concern with improving national standards as reflected in:

- The longer-term aim of positioning Ireland in the top ten performing countries in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)
- The ambition of ‘building a knowledge society’
- The more immediate objective of reviewing junior and senior cycle provision at post-primary level in order to ‘encourage greater innovation and independent learning’.

## 5.7 Progress and developments

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 pupils. 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 primary 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 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 pupils 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 pupils 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 focussing the curriculum statements on learning outcomes and confining guidance on how the curriculum should be implemented entirely to supporting documents
- The progress in respect 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
- There has been some reduction in the autonomy of schools over assessment. The introduction of mandatory standardised testing in literacy, numeracy and science at post-primary level will reduce the flexibility of schools to use or not use such assessments
- The recent introduction of school self-evaluation at primary and post-primary levels enables schools themselves to arrive at school-specific information on how well they are doing which they are expected to use in their planning for improvement. This encourages schools to prioritise particular learning targets and to make the necessary pedagogical changes to achieve those targets within a broad curriculum and pedagogical framework
- 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.

## 5.8 Increasing autonomy over curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

### Curriculum, pedagogy

*Primary schools:* A range of possibilities can be identified for extending the curriculum autonomy of schools at primary level. For example:

- Consideration could be given to the granting of complete autonomy to primary schools over the curriculum they teach, subject to the satisfaction of general national requirements in respect of literacy, numeracy, physical education and health education curricula. This possibility would have the advantages of enabling primary schools to introduce new subjects and remove others, to construe current primary school subjects in different ways, to respond more effectively to the education needs of pupils in a changing world, and to draw on the particular curriculum expertise of teachers. It does, however, run the risk of resulting in the provision of curricula that lack breadth and balance, and could result in children arriving to post-primary schools with a very diverse educational experience
- The replacement of the current detailed national curriculum for primary schools with a more skeletal national curriculum framework that is less specified than the current curriculum for primary schools could be a better proposition. Such a national curriculum framework would provide a set of key principles for curriculum planning, prioritising and review. Within the framework of these principles, schools would have the freedom to select subjects and to remove others, to construe subjects in different ways, decide on subject content and allocate time across subjects in line with school learning goals. As with the previous possibility, this would have the advantage of enabling primary schools to be more creative and innovative and thereby more responsive to the needs of their learners. The requirement on schools to exercise curriculum autonomy within a national framework of key principles would help to safeguard against loss of breadth and/or balance in the curriculum delivered
- Providing additional flexibility in teacher deployment around delivery of the curriculum is another possibility. This would enable schools to depart from the traditional approach to curriculum delivery at primary level whereby all subjects/ curriculum areas are generally delivered by one teacher to his/her class and would allow for teachers with a particular subject knowledge or pedagogical expertise in an area (for example, Irish, music) to teach that subject to several classes in a primary school. While this approach could take somewhat from the integrated delivery of the current primary curriculum, it would have the advantage of promoting high standards in pedagogy underpinned by sound subject knowledge, thus enriching the quality of the curriculum provided to pupils.

*Post-primary schools:* 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. As these changes are implemented, they will have implications for the programme for Transition Year (where schools already have full autonomy over the content of the curriculum) and at a later stage for senior cycle curricula.

### **Assessment**

Reforms that offer greater autonomy to schools over assessment are already underway but could be extended further:

- The Junior Cycle reforms are intended to extend to some extent schools' autonomy over the assessment of students' learning, particularly in the assessment of short courses
- It should also be noted that some aspects of Government policy will lessen schools' autonomy regarding assessment. The introduction of mandatory standardised testing in literacy, numeracy and science at post-primary level will reduce the flexibility of schools to use or not to use such assessments
- 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. This would help to meet more effectively students' needs through the curriculum offered at senior-cycle level and through facilitating greater linkages with the world of work. It would, of course, have significant implications regarding curriculum design and delivery, with attendant cost implications.

### **Leadership**

The development of school leaders as instructional leaders will be critical to realising in a fresh way the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment autonomy that schools currently have and may be given in the future. Further, instead of being managers who implement policy, school principals will increasingly need to become leaders of their schools who can also exercise leadership in the environment beyond their schools, and articulate the connection between the two (Hargreaves et al, 2007). In 2015, a national centre for school leadership was established to provide training for teachers in leadership roles. The work currently underway by the Department of Education and Skills' Leadership Group and by the national centre provides the context within which the range of possibilities for developing such school leaders below is situated.

- Reconceptualising the professional development/training and employment requirements for school leaders to include one or more of the following:

- A minimum pre-service professional development requirement for principals: This could comprise completing or starting a qualification programme as is the procedure in Scotland, Australia (Victoria), Canada (Ontario), as well as the United States (New York, California) (Taipale, 2012)
  - A defined period of induction: This could include a mentoring system, such as that provided in the first phase of the national centre for school leadership programme, starting later this year. This will see 100 mentors trained to offer support to at least 75 newly appointed principals each year
  - On-going state-funded continuing professional development for principals
  - Measures to enhance the mobility of principals: Possible options here include the introduction of a more flexible employment contract, redeployment arrangements, fixed-term contracts, and mechanisms for regular development and performance reviews for principals
- Providing a realistic level of support for school leaders at middle-management level in schools, with assistant or deputy school leaders whose job descriptions include leadership of curriculum and assessment: 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 (OECD, 2008). Given the increased administrative burden on school principals which accompany greater autonomy, this is an important requirement.

### **Qualifications and skills of teachers**

- Further work needs to be undertaken to strengthen the continuing professional development of teachers. While very significant changes have been made to initial teacher education, the Teaching Council could consider making mandatory a minimum level of ongoing professional development as a condition of teachers' registration. The Council's proposals contained in the document Cosán could be a step in this regard. This would help to embed a rigorous and in-depth pedagogical development of teachers in the school system and would also equip teachers to utilise more fully the autonomy that schools and teachers already enjoy over curriculum and assessment.

## **5.9 Accountability considerations**

Decentralisation and school autonomy create a greater need for the evaluation of schools, school leaders and teachers (OECD, 2013B). While on the face of it, the possibilities outlined below may appear to run counter to a move to increase school autonomy, the literature and the experience in countries with high levels of autonomy indicate that measures such as these need to be in place to ensure that improved outcomes for students result from greater autonomy. Possibilities for developing the accountability of schools and teachers include:

- Increased accountability of schools to parents: At primary level in Ireland, parents receive a detailed end-of-year report on their children's progress, including the results of standardised tests in literacy and numeracy. There are plans to extend this assessment and reporting into second-level schools as the new Junior Cycle arrangements are introduced. As the new reporting systems to parents are embedded, the possibility of introducing more formal guidelines regarding the frequency, duration and expectations around parent-teacher meetings could be explored
- The further development of the school self-evaluation reports provided by schools to ensure adequate detail about their progress and achievements to date will further underpin school accountability as school autonomy increases. The school self-evaluation process has very considerable potential to improve teaching and learning but only if it is allowed sufficient time to embed into teachers' practice
- The development of systems which would allow regular and structured review of the work and development needs of principals and teachers would support schools to exercise greater autonomy regarding the curriculum to be taught and would enable principals to exercise a real leadership role regarding the quality of learning and teaching in their schools. Experience in other countries has demonstrated the potential benefits of such systems, particularly in encouraging meaningful professional conversations about the work and performance of principals and teachers and the ongoing development of professional skills. However, it should be noted that reviews of international experience of development and performance systems have warned strongly against seeking to link review outcomes with student tests and examination results or with teachers' pay levels. OECD research has shown, for example, that linking test outcomes with teacher performance and development review creates incentives for teachers to distort testing and test results and is regarded as unfair by many teachers and others as it ignores the impact of students' socio-economic background on student learning
- The ongoing development of inspection models is in line with increasing accountability. Since 2010, the development of a range of inspection models, including unannounced inspections and follow-up inspections has meant that the frequency of inspection has increased substantially. Further, the publication of national analyses of findings as well as individual whole-school evaluation reports, follow-through inspection reports, and subject inspection reports at post-primary level, contribute to ensuring accountability at school and system level.



## 5.10 Options for consideration: curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

To progress the Programme for Government's aims of improving the effectiveness of schools and the quality of students' learning outcomes, consideration could be given to the following:

### 1. Curriculum

- At present, the primary school curricula for English and Irish are 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 an approach which defines both *what* is to be taught and learned and *how* teaching and learning should take place. 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. All guidance on methodologies and approaches could be confined to supporting documentation
- Consideration could be given within the framework to giving schools 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 carries significant risks and would require careful monitoring to ensure that students experienced a balanced and broad curriculum
- 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
- The curricular changes now underway at Junior Cycle should be fully implemented.

### 2. Leadership

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

- 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.

### **3. Teacher qualifications and skills**

- 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.

### **4. Accountability**

- The provision of more frequent and more comprehensive information to parents through written reports and parent-teacher meetings could be considered
- The development, over time, of the recently introduced school self-evaluation reports to ensure that they contain adequate detail about school progress and achievements in relation to curriculum delivery could be considered
- 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

- The development of new inspection models for school inspections could continue and the growth in the range of inspection reports that are published could continue. 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
- 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.

## 6. Budgets and funding: Options for consideration

### 6.1 Defining budgetary autonomy

Autonomy over budgets and funding can take a number of forms. These can range from situations where schools have autonomy over limited aspects of non-pay current expenditure which is provided by a central authority to situations where schools have full discretion over all capital and current expenditure including the ability to set differential salary levels for all staff. Autonomy may also refer to the source of a school's funding: in some systems virtually all funds over which the school has discretion may be sourced from government or state authorities; in other systems, schools are free to raise local funding from philanthropic sources and/or parents.

### 6.2 Advantages and disadvantages of budgetary autonomy

Arguments advanced for and against greater autonomy for schools in relation to budgets and funding include the following:

- Arguments are made that school autonomy over budgets improves efficiency
  - The decentralisation of responsibilities around the funding of education delivery to schools or other local bodies is often regarded as a means of improving efficiency and reducing the cost of education, while at the same time ensuring that resources are targeted where they are most needed.
  - Research suggest the schools that have greater control over their financial resources are more likely to have a supply of the resources they want to use (OECD, 2005)
- Schools with autonomy over budgets and salary levels of teachers can provide incentives to attract higher performing teachers and to maintain high standards
  - Giving schools, especially schools in disadvantaged areas, autonomy to offer an allowance for teaching in struggling schools is one way of encouraging experienced and high-quality teachers to work with these settings
  - Highly performing teachers and principals may be rewarded with a pay bonus or salary "top-ups"
  - Autonomy over staffing also means that schools have the freedom to fire inefficient or under-performing teachers.
- A strong theme in the literature from the US and Australia is that devolved authority over budgets has not worked as well as expected for schools or central government
  - School managers find themselves addressing financial decisions rather than educational decisions; teachers and parents express concern that the funding

- allocation shrinks relative to the cost of service provision over time; and central governments are perceived to have side-stepped difficult decision-making.
- At central level, the gain in terms of a reduced administrative burden does not materialise to the extent anticipated as existing administrative structures are replaced by oversight mechanisms.
  - Research suggests that there is no clear relationship between budgetary autonomy and school performance
    - The impact of budgetary autonomy on levels of student achievement was considered by the OECD with reference to PISA 2009 at two levels, country level and school level. It finds that there is no clear relationship between autonomy in resource allocation and performance at the level of the school (OECD, 2011).
    - The OECD also finds that the relationship between the performance of individual schools and their level of autonomy in allocating resources is positive in some countries and negative in others. (OECD, 2011)
    - Interestingly, the national study on Australia's 2009 PISA results reports a very small positive correlation between student achievement and school autonomy in budgeting and staffing (Thompson, et al 2010). However, as Cobbold (2012) points out, the level of correlation is too slight to be significant and there is no correlation at the level of the school
  - Internationally, high levels of autonomy over budget are comparatively rare
    - Belgium, Finland and Sweden are rare examples in which schools have a high degree of budgetary autonomy. Even in such countries, the management of budgets is constrained by centrally defined 'non-negotiables' such as maintenance of facilities; cost of conducting mandatory testing; student support services. In addition, accountability measures are set in place which provide certainty that budget decisions do not undermine centrally defined objectives for the school system. Very often, these require the schools to conform to a centrally defined accounting method at designated periods during the year.
    - In some states, final budgetary approval from the central authority is required. In Finland, for example, whilst schools generally consider themselves to be highly autonomous and central government has only limited influence on the budget decisions made by municipalities, there are careful measures in place to ensure equity of funding across schools.

### **6.3 Budgetary autonomy in other jurisdictions**

#### **Belgium (Flanders)**

Schools in Flanders have a high level of autonomy in the use of public funds (Eurydice, 2007). Flemish schools at both primary and post-primary levels make all decisions regarding capital

expenditure and acquisitions, operating expenditure, the acquisition of computer equipment, loans, the acquisition of immovable and movables, and the employment of non-teaching staff, subject to the limits set by national laws with no external intervention (Eurydice, 2007).

The schools also make all decisions regarding the employment of teaching staff subject to a predetermined general framework which is specific to education. This situation contrasts markedly with that of Germany where schools have no autonomy over the use of public funds for capital expenditure, operating expenditure, or the employment of teaching or non-teaching staff (Eurydice, 2007).

### The UK

Converting to academy status was seen as bringing significant financial reward for the school when academies were introduced initially. However, that view appears to have moderated in more recent times. Academies are funded by the General Annual Grant (GAG) from the Young People's Learning Agency. The grant comprises two elements: the School Budget Share and the Local Authority Central Spend Equivalent Grant (Source). In addition, there is a one-off grant of Stg£25,000 for each school that converts to academy status. However, this grant does not apply to schools that are sponsored. Finally, all capital expenditure comes from the central exchequer budget and must be authorised directly by the UK Secretary of State for Education.

A dedicated element of the funding, the Local Authority Central Spend Equivalent Grant, is used to supplement funding for academies because they can no longer avail directly of services from local authorities. As an example of the scale of additional funding, Morley High School in Leeds gained an additional Stg£175 per pupil per year when it became an academy in 2011. This money is used to purchase services, in many instances directly from the local authority, which are supplied by that authority to non-academy schools.

The UK National Audit Office (NAO), the equivalent of the Irish Comptroller and Auditor General, found that accounting systems for academy schools were not sufficiently robust to ensure that financial failures were picked up and acted upon. The NAO highlighted the lack of transparency in the funding arrangements for academies and pointed to a Stg£1billion over-run in two years as a result.<sup>2</sup>

### The Netherlands

Dutch schools have a high level of autonomy over budgetary matters. Schools can appoint and employ personnel as long as wage rules and teacher qualifications rules are followed. Government funding for primary schools flows through the school boards and municipal governments. School boards manage the budget. Second-level schools receive a block grant based on per-student expenditures and each school has autonomy over the use of resources. It should be noted that local authorities can exert informal influence on the policies of schools

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/news/dfе-warned-over-academy-spending>

and school boards in relation to spending priorities. At primary level, salaries are relatively fixed by civil service rules, but are completely negotiable at second-level; second-level schools can negotiate teacher salaries at the level of the school.

### Sweden

'Free' schools in Sweden were introduced in the early 1990s, when the authority to run primary and secondary education was transferred to local municipalities, to which full financial responsibility for primary and secondary schools was devolved. Initially, central government oversaw the redistribution of financial resources from wealthier municipalities to those serving less-advantaged communities, but by 1993, government involvement in school funding ended. Over time, differences in expenditure on education across municipalities increased considerably, raising questions about equity of resourcing. Teacher pay determination was also decentralized in the mid-1990s. Since that time, school-level factors affect wages to a greater extent (Björklund et al 2004) and the difference in the incidence of teacher shortage between advantaged and disadvantaged schools is relatively larger in Sweden than in other OECD countries (OECD 2014).

The largest group of free schools are for-profit providers of a general education, but special pedagogy, religious and special language/ethnic group schools also exist. Critics say profit-seeking puts quality at risk. In the wake of several school companies' bankruptcies, the Swedish government has indicated that private-equity funds will no longer be welcome owners.

### Finland

In Finland, school budgets are controlled by the municipal government and managed by a Municipal Education Board. 45% of funding for education comes from central government and 55% from municipal funds. Municipal funding for education comes from income taxes (which are collected at the municipal level) and property taxes. Teacher salaries are relatively fixed by civil service rules and municipalities choose their teachers under very stringent conditions.

While Finnish schools generally consider themselves to be highly autonomous and central government has only limited influence on the budget decisions made by municipalities, there are careful measures in place to ensure equity of funding across schools. Estimating the central budget involves consideration of actual expenditures by schools and is supported by a built-in equity mechanism, so that richer municipalities have to contribute proportionally more.

## 6.4 Budgetary autonomy in Ireland

Overall, state-funded schools in Ireland are partly autonomous with regard to budget. 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. In addition, 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. The budgetary autonomy of schools in Ireland is considered in greater detail below with reference to the different elements of the funding.

### Large-scale capital works

- 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
- Major capital projects, for example, new school buildings and major refurbishments and extensions, are funded by the Exchequer. Schools authorities have comparatively little autonomy in managing these funds. The state determines the brief for the works, the technical specification, and the order of costs. The appointment of design teams and contractors is governed by procurement regulations and school authorities must comply with these in full, in order to reduce the risk of lawsuits arising
- Due to the scale of funding involved (these are usually multi-million euro projects) and their technical complexity, few, if any schools would have the technical expertise to manage the process themselves. Therefore, the Department of Education and Skills and/or other public bodies such as the OPW or ETBs, take a central role in the management of these projects. The budget and timing of approval of progress requires the Department's approval, and final sign-off is subject to compliance with the Department's requirements
- Even with the significant level of Departmental involvement, the feedback from many school authorities is that the process requires significant input from the school management team and is a heavy burden on the administration of the school.

### Small-scale capital works

- 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*, and *Emergency Works Grants*. While funding



comes directly from central government, the local school authority has discretion to some extent to prioritise needs and allocate resources accordingly

- Calls for proposals issue from the Department and schools can apply for funding in line with the scheme parameters. Prioritisation rests with the school authority and, if funding is awarded, the responsibility for managing and delivering the project, within the funds made available, lies with the school authority. The school supervises the tendering process, oversees the works and is responsible for signing off and paying for the works upon satisfactory completion
- In this regard, the school has considerable autonomy in ensuring the delivery of the project within the budget and the specification. Significantly, it is the school that identifies which works it wishes to prioritise, without recourse to the Department. These schemes are considered to have been very successful in allowing the upgrading of the existing school building stock and, in some cases, avoiding the need for major refurbishment work
- All primary schools receive the *minor works grant*, which varies according to enrolment. Schools have complete autonomy on how this grant is to be spent, subject to the condition that it be used on capital works. Schools are allowed to manage the funds over a number of years in order to “save up” for significant expenditure, if this accords with the priorities they have identified
- The devolution of responsibility to school authorities for managing works under these schemes has benefited the Department in terms of allowing the delivery of a greater number of projects without the need for a corresponding increase in administrative and technical resources.

### **Salaries**

- 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 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 has recently engaged in an arbitration process regarding those salaries. 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.

### **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.

## 6.5 The Programme for Government

The Programme for Government 2011-2016 contains a commitment to piloting the devolution of an annual capital budget to schools to allow schools to plan for capital budgets. The rationale for strengthening the autonomy of schools in this way was that schools would be enabled to prioritise their capital requirements, plan for these, and allocate funds in accordance with their priorities.

## 6.6 Increasing budgetary autonomy

### Capital budgets

A capital sum could be allocated to each school on an annual basis. This could be for minor works, as currently happens for primary schools, and calculated according to enrolment numbers. Alternatively, the sums allocated to schools could be larger in order to allow them to build up a reserve, on a sinking fund model, which would finance major refurbishment and extension works. If this money were insufficient to cover the full cost, schools could explore borrowing against the future capital payments due to the school.

### *Advantages*

- Implementing these possibilities would give schools greater autonomy over how to prioritise their capital requirements and they would have the autonomy to allocate funds according to these priorities. They would have the incentive to seek best value for their money and ensure that works that benefit the school community are prioritised
- Over time, schools would develop expertise in managing these funds which would contribute to the development of general financial management expertise within the

school. This expertise would be required if the school were to build up sufficient reserves to finance major extensions or refurbishments.

### *Disadvantages*

- There are disadvantages associated with schools having large sums built up as reserves, including the risk of misappropriation of public funds and/or the use of funds for other pressing items, outside the scope of the terms of the grant aid. There is also a risk that schools would seek to expend these funds on cosmetic or non-priority items and would continue to apply for grant aid from the Exchequer for urgent works which are required to keep the school operating, for example, favouring window replacement or yard resurfacing over boiler replacement
- Devolving greater autonomy in relation to capital projects raises challenges in relation to the capacity of the schools to manage major building projects. The expertise to comply fully with public procurement procedures, ensure that designs meet the long term requirements of the school, comply fully with specifications and are designed and built on time, on budget and to specification, is unlikely to exist within most schools. It could be argued that building up this expertise in a school is wasteful of resources as major building work is usually only required in schools once in a generation and so the expertise would not be required again. This strategy would also run counter to the current trend for the public service as whole in Ireland, where centralised procurement and shared services are being promoted in the interests of efficiency
- A major project, which would require input over two to three years, would be beyond the capacity of schools to manage. This raises the prospect of schools engaging outside “clerk of works” type expertise, which would place a cost burden on the school and, in any event, experience has shown that there is a need for the school to manage these outside experts
- The experience with the Summer Works Scheme would indicate that the level of enthusiasm for taking on the work involved in delivering small to medium scale works varies. Even where the school is willing to take this work on, the fact that the work takes place while the school is on holiday and the principal is free of the usual term-time responsibilities is a key element in ensuring his/her availability to oversee such works
- The Programme for Government proposal would involve determining the level of the annual grant to be made available to each school. A per capita rate paid on the basis of enrolments has the advantage of simplicity and transparency. However, there is a risk that schools in older areas, with declining populations and older buildings, will be

chronically underfunded for capital works. Meanwhile, schools in new buildings will be building up considerable capital reserves

- At present, the main focus of the schools capital programme is on the provision of additional school buildings to meet the demands arising from demographic growth. This means that it is not always possible to allocate resources for other devolved works, let alone fund an annual amount to all schools. Additional financial resources would be required to bring about system-level change.

### **Current budgets**

All existing current-budget grants could be combined into one lump payment for schools which they could then use to cover non-pay costs only or non-pay costs and non-teaching and non-SNA pay costs. Schools could manage this payment according to their own priorities and needs. The streamlining of the payment of existing grants into a single payment could ease the administrative burden on both schools and the Department

### **Autonomy over salaries**

One option in relation to salaries is that schools could be given autonomy over all funding for pay expenditure and devolved responsibility to set pay rates for teachers.

#### *Advantages*

- Schools could determine locally the pay and conditions of teachers, so that management could use financial incentives such as recruitment bonuses and performance bonuses to recruit quality professionals. This would allow schools to compete to attract the highest quality teachers and would allow for the creation of differentiated career and compensation systems. It would also facilitate the removal of teachers whose work is deemed by school management to be ineffective or unsatisfactory. This would provide additional incentives for excellent teaching and would bolster the performance management strategies available to principals and school boards. Given the weight of evidence that the quality of teaching is the single-most influential factor in student outcomes, attracting effective teachers to low-performing and disadvantaged schools will make a difference in student achievement. Giving these schools autonomy to offer a pay bonus or “top-up” for teaching in these struggling schools is one way of encouraging experienced and high-quality teachers to work with these schools.

#### *Disadvantages*

- Implementing these options could lead to a constant upward trend in pay costs and would be likely to undermine public pay policy
- These options represent a significant departure from established industrial relations practices and could have a detrimental impact on the terms and conditions of teachers.

Another option with regard to salaries is that schools could be given autonomy over all pay-related expenditure but within the constraints of Government negotiated national pay scales. However, this would be problematic. As teachers grow older and progress up the incremental salary scale, these experienced teachers would become relatively more expensive when compared with younger and less experienced teachers. This could create an inequity between schools: those with younger staff would be able to afford to employ greater numbers of teachers, and it would create an incentive for schools to encourage the early exit of teachers who prove to be too expensive.

## **6.7 Accountability considerations**

- Devolving responsibility for budgetary management to schools would have considerable practical implications and procedural changes for schools and the Department. 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 pupils
- While granting schools autonomy over expenditure has the advantage of creating an incentive for prudent management of resources, according greater autonomy for current budget expenditure to schools would mean releasing schools from the requirement to participate in shared services and public centralised procurement. Recent proposals in relation to centralised procurement for schools are based on the premise that there is significant potential to reduce costs for schools by getting them to use public sector framework agreements, having centralised sectoral procurement competitions for certain services/products, and also by changing the approach to purchasing for locally sourced goods and services
- Greater autonomy over budgetary matters carries with it the need to ensure that schools have the capacity to manage their resources efficiently and effectively. There would be a need to develop management, and in particular financial management, expertise and capacity within schools
- There is also a need to monitor how resources are managed and to evaluate outcomes and comment on the decisions made by individual school managers. This runs the risk of creating a perception of less rather than more autonomy as financial returns and financial inspections would become a feature of school life

- Intervention procedures for schools that have excessive deficits or surpluses would also have to be developed to avoid the potential of schools becoming insolvent with the potential of a school going into receivership or liquidation
- The challenge of ensuring that the process by which funds are allocated to different schools is open, fair and transparent, while taking account of school contexts, would also have to be worked through. Formulae in terms of funding schools to ensure that Government priorities in relation to effective targeting at the level of school deprivation would also have to be developed. Whether the capacity of schools to engage in outside fundraising would have an effect on funding allocations would also have to be considered
- There are also disadvantages associated with allowing schools to borrow on the security of future Exchequer funding for capital purposes. This borrowing would count as part of the Exchequer borrowing requirement and there would have to be controls put in place regarding the scale of any such borrowing.

## **6.8 Options for consideration: budgets and funding**

To increase the autonomy of state-funded schools over budgets and funding, the following options could be considered:

### **1. Capital works**

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 limited budgets; a requirement to prioritise spending where it is most needed; the complexity of major multi-million capital projects; 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 outlined in the Programme for Government to give 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.

### **2. Non-teacher/ non-SNA pay grants**

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.

### **3. Teacher and SNA pay:**

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.

### **4. Accountability**

- Any move to devolve 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
- 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
- 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.

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