

**Fianna Fáil Submission to
the Consultation by
Department of Education
and Skills on the Statement
of Strategy 2016-2018**

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Introduction

Ireland must systematically prioritise investment in education. Our schools, colleges and universities have a sustained record of delivering for Irish society. We consistently rate as one of the most productive and competitive economies in the world, the direct result of an education system which has delivered enormous progress for our country.

Throughout our history, Fianna Fáil has been behind dramatic expansions at every level of the education system. By any measure the scale and pace of increased participation in education in this country has been dramatic and extraordinary.

At second level we have gone from a system which was effectively closed to large sections of society to one where we now have universal access and a high level of school completion. For Early School Leaving the latest available figures for all EU27 member states, which are for 2009, show that the proportion of early school leavers in Ireland in 2009 was 11% which compares to the EU-27 and EU-15 averages of 14% and 16% respectively. This ranks Ireland as joint ninth in the list of EU member states.

At third level we have moved from a small and exclusive sector to having one of the world's highest levels of qualifications. In the space of 30 years, we have gone from having one of the lowest rates of third level graduation rates in the OECD, to having almost the highest among our younger people.

However, under the previous government many of the remarkable advances we have made in building a quality education system have begun to be eroded. Many of the worst decisions of recent years were not forced on government they formed part of a clear policy decision outline in late 2011. The Fine Gael-Labour government agreed cuts and dismantled schemes which had helped tackle educational disadvantage and improve access. The abolition of post graduate grants was also an appallingly regressive move.

Educational attainment has a broad-ranging impact on many aspects of life, from personal development to civic engagement and economic well-being. However there are still many communities throughout the country who are not fully participating in the benefits from Ireland's education system. Geography – where someone lives – continues to dictate the extent and quality of access and supports available to both older and younger students. It is not coincidence that patterns of low educational attainment exist alongside above-average unemployment, emigration, ill health and high levels of exclusion. Reducing school failure, improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and ensuring fair and equitable access to third level for all pupils is a key priority in Fianna Fáil's education policy agenda.

Our country requires an ambitious strategy to restore and enhance the quality of our education system.

Giving all Children a Head-Start: Investing in Primary Education

The following are the investments and reforms that we believe need to be made to enhance the quality and fairness of primary education over the next three years.

Smaller Classes for Primary Schools

The first place to start is with our overcrowded classes at primary level with class sizes in many counties at their highest rate in recent memory. This must be immediately addressed. Many of the youngest students in primary school are being taught in super-size classes of 30-40 pupils.

Average class size in Ireland is 25 pupils, greater than the European average of 21. However, due to the large number of small schools the average masks significant variation among schools and at a county level. Approximately 130,000 (or one in five) primary school pupils are in "super-size" classes of over 30 students which was up from 96,000 in 2006/2007 and 9,639 pupils are in classes with more than 35 students.

As a first step, to ease the burden on schools with 'super-sized' classes, Fianna Fáil believes that we should immediately reduce class sizes at primary level. We are committed to reducing class sizes significantly over the term of government, reaching an average class size of a maximum of 23 pupils.

We believe the ambition should be progressively implement one point reductions in average class size, prioritising reductions for the youngest children under 9 years of age, where lower ratios have been shown to have the greatest impact on educational progress.

This could involve employing an additional 500 new teachers each year for three years, at a cost of €23 million additional per annum¹. At the end of three years, there would be 1,500 teachers additional to those required to cater for demographic growth.

¹ As per PQ 46239/15 the cost of employing an entry grade teacher at primary level (including employers PRSI) is €46,000, so the cost of employing 2,500 primary school teachers is approximately €23m per year. .

Reviving Small Schools

The previous government's cuts to the school staffing ratio in smaller schools must be reversed. Many of these schools are teetering on the brink of survival because of the punitive measures and cuts contained in recent Budgets.

Recent changes to teacher retention thresholds are only a small row back on the cuts to small schools previously introduced. It will not lead to any major improvements for many small schools, as the emphasis is on retaining, rather than gaining teachers and capitation funding. It is threatening to wipe out a vital aspect of community life in rural Ireland. We believe over the next three years there should be an increase support for small rural schools. To restore the staffing schedule for retaining and gaining a teacher that applied for schools pre-2012 would allow communities to regain confidence in the viability of their local school. We estimate that the full year cost of this would be approximately €23 million²

Providing Adequate Funding for Primary Schools

Fianna Fáil is committed to free education for all. We believe that the current practice of schools being maintained by voluntary contributions is inequitable and not conducive to an efficiently functioning school system. The bottom line is that schools are not adequately funded to allow them to function properly. Primary Schools, especially, are badly funded and parents are being expected to make up the shortfall, regardless of whether they can afford a voluntary contribution or not. Many families are under severe pressure to meet the extra costs.

In addition, we believe the three-year Strategy should commit to fully eradicate the need for schools to seek and rely upon voluntary contributions from parents/guardians for classroom resources.

We estimate that a 10% increase in capitation funding for primary schools, at a cost of an additional €21 million per year would go a long way to achieving this with the aim of a restoration of pre-2010 capitation levels by 2019/2020 (€35 million).

Guaranteed Schools Capital Programmes

Fianna Fáil is committed to placing the Schools Capital Programmes, such as the Minor Works Grant, which provides funding for maintenance and upgrade works, on a permanent footing linked in an automatic way to the annual capital depreciation costs that each school incurs.

² As per PQ 33905/15: "The cumulative savings achieved to date from the 2012 small schools budget measure are of the order of €23m. This gives an indication of the overall costs involved in relation to restoring teacher numbers in small schools"

This grant is essential for the constant upkeep and maintenance of schools right across the country. Many schools have been forced to run up huge debts in years where the grants are not given, to pay for essential works like roof repairs and toilet upgrades after the grant was rescinded.

Capital funding for minor works should be put on a multi-annual basis (five year periods), to ensure funding predictability and give schools the confidence to undertake remedial works as required rather than waiting until maintenance problems deteriorate.

On an annual basis (from 2017), we estimate that €30.8 million per annum should be available in a total package for minor works or €154 million in a five-year cycle.³

Leadership, Management and Teacher Morale within Schools

The current situation and attitude to leadership and management in schools is unsustainable, especially for schools with less than 179 pupils. Due to cutbacks, principals have very little time to fulfil their administration responsibilities and practically zero time to engage in future strategic planning.

Principals of schools with less than 179 pupils, teach on average 169 days a year with 14 days for fulfilling administrative responsibilities, whereas a principal of a school with 179 pupils does not teach at all.

Fianna Fáil proposes that schools should be given one administration day per week for teaching principals, which could be achieved at a cost of €10 million (in Budget 2017)⁴. This cost would cover the establishment of a permanent pool of teachers to replace teaching principals on their administration day. Each teacher pool would be shared between schools in geographic clusters.

We believe that the Strategy should also aim to rebuild middle management structures within both primary and secondary schools by removing the moratorium on posts of responsibility for assistant principals, ensuring that any additional posts are used to meet broader curriculum objectives of individual schools, including ICT, special needs education, pastoral care, and mentoring/induction/CPD of teachers.

We believe the appointment of approximately 250 new assistant principal posts would make a significant contribution in this regard, at a cost of €3 million.⁵

³ As per PQ 30333/15 reply in 2015 there was of "€28m to primary schools under the Minor Works Grant Scheme." We propose to increase this by 10%.

⁴ As per PQ 33909/15 reply "Improving these arrangements so as to enable teaching principals to have one release day per week would cost of the order of €10 million per annum."

⁵ As per PQ 11492/12, allowance paid to assistant principals was €8520 per year prior to being withdrawn with effect from 1st February 2012. The cost of appointment of 350 new assistant principal posts on similar terms would be €2.98 million

Fianna Fáil recognises the huge sacrifices that have been asked of teachers in recent years. Major progress has been made to date in delivering improved public services with fewer resources.

Under the provisions of the Croke Park Agreement teachers are expected to perform an additional 36 hours per school year at primary level and 33 additional hours at post-primary level. We believe that teachers' supervision of extracurricular or after-school activities should be eligible to be counted as Croke Park Hours where appropriate.

Finally, Fianna Fáil supports the principle of equal treatment for newly recruited staff in the public sector, including those in the education sector.

We welcome the establishment of a Public Service Pay Commission to examine pay levels across the public service, including entry levels of pay. This was a key demand of Fianna Fáil in our discussions on an arrangement to facilitate a minority Government. We will contribute constructively to this Commission when established and seek an early conclusion of its work.

There are too many temporary teachers in the system and we are committed to improving their terms and conditions of employment. We welcome the implementation of Ward Report recommendations on redeployment eligibility for teachers covering for a secondment or career break, which will mean that teachers in temporary positions become eligible for a Contract of Indefinite Duration (CID) after two years of teaching. A full implementation of the Report's recommendations for further reduction in workforce casualisation should be committed to by the three-year Strategy.

Reforming Special Needs Education

Since the 15% cut to resource teaching hours in 2012, pupils with special needs children get significantly less support than they need. A child with hearing impairment, for example, loses out on 36 minutes a week of the four hours of recommended weekly resource teaching. The three-year Strategy should commit to providing an adequate level of resources to enable children with SEN to fully participate in mainstream education.

This should involve a commitment to increase Resource Teaching Hour Allocations from their current 85% of Special Education Review Committee recommended allocation levels to 92.5%. The full year cost of this would be in the region of €29 million.

Over the full term of office the commitment should be to restoring resource teaching hours to 100% of recommended hours (full cost up to €70 million)⁶

At present, due to a series of destructive decisions taken by the previous government, the system of special needs supports to schools is on its knees. One of the central problems is the operation of the NCSE as gatekeeper to special needs supports for schools, rather than as an advocate.

The NCSE is failing to fully resource children with SEN and give them a personal education plan. One of the main problems is the NCSE interprets the role of the SNA as a quasi-nursing role rather than as an Edu-Carer role. An Edu-carer role is to work in tandem with teachers in classroom to help SEN children to maintain concentration. This was the main role of SNAs formerly, when they were allocated to specific pupils. The main rationale behind this move by the NCSE was related to resource constraints and its practical effect has been to put greater pressure upon teachers in the classroom.

Due to changes made by the NCSE 3 years ago that saw children being allotted SNA hours rather than a dedicated SNA, many children are unable to access the curriculum because the SNAs are not allocated to them full-time in the classroom. The three-year Strategy should commit to ensuring there are more SNAs in the classroom on a more regular basis. This will allow teachers more time to concentrate on their teaching task.

⁶ As per PQ 30326/15 reply: the cost of adding an additional 15% to the existing allocation, which in itself represents an increase of 22% in the allocation recent years, would be approximately an additional €71m per year.

Overhauling the System for Special Needs Assessment and Allocation of Resource Teaching

The current system of SEN assessment and allocation for learning supports and resource teaching across schools is not acceptable and is not working. There are gross inefficiencies and inequities in the current system of allocating Resource Teachers, where wealthier parents can afford to gain access to resources through a private diagnosis of learning difficulty.

Schools in more affluent areas also tend to be significantly advantaged under the current system of SNA Resources allocation, as more students with SENs are diagnosed prior to entering junior infants, and the schools can apply for supports prior to the student beginning school.

It takes at least a year for students to be publicly assessed for special needs by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), while costs of getting privately assessed can be upward of €1000.

While this situation is not acceptable, there are very serious concerns about the Minister's proposed new allocation system for resource teaching due to be introduced in 2016, which is being piloted across schools at present.

Instead of allocating extra resources into the NEPS to reduce the waiting times for public assessment, the previous government's proposed solution to this inequitable situation has been to transfer resources from children that have already been assessed.

Instead of a child centred approach the new system currently being piloted gives an allocation of resource teaching hours to schools based on their catchment demographic and socioeconomic profile.

Pupils with SEN in middle class schools and Pupils with SEN in schools in less affluent areas have an equal right to access learning supports. However with these new Learning Support and Resource Teaching allocation criteria will deprive children with an assessed SEN need of resource supports.

Fianna Fáil believes that Learning Supports and Resource Teaching should be based on need.

Many schools will face significant reductions and pupils with special learning needs will suffer should this system be introduced as proposed in 2017. The equivalent would be to base the allocation of medical care on general area demographic characteristics rather than clinical need. The proposal to base part of the allocation on Standardised Tests is also flawed, as these will only identify children who are failing not those who are underperforming.

We believe to reassess the allocation system for Resource Teaching and Learning Supports should be reformed by raising the boat for all, not by 'robbing Peter to pay Paul'. Rather than taking resource hours from children who have assessed needs, Fianna Fáil's proposed new system would put more resources into the NEPS to reduce waiting times for assessment. We believe that initially an

additional 100 new psychologists are required at a cost of €7 million in 2017⁷, with priority given to schools in disadvantaged areas and put in place greater numbers of resource teachers as dictated by the level of children's need.

Establishing In-School Early Intervention Teams for Children with Developmental Needs

We propose overhauling and radically changing how early intervention services for children with developmental delays and disabilities are provided. We are committed to putting new Early Intervention teams to operate on-site in Pre-schools and Primary schools.

Fianna Fáil believes in introducing multi-disciplinary therapy teams on-site in pre-schools and primary schools for children with development delays. This would be a new point of departure for education of children with development delays and special needs in Ireland.

This would include Speech and Language teams, Paediatric Occupational and Physical Therapists; to be employed by the Department of Education and allocated to given geographic areas.

These school-based Early Intervention Teams should be shared between community and private pre-schools participating in the ECCE programme and Primary Schools in clusters within each given geographic area.

It has been proven by international research that, children with special needs make the greatest progress when they

- 1) Begin therapy at an early age;
- 2) Have continuity in their therapies in terms of similarity of treatment and
- 3) Can develop ongoing personal relationship with their therapist.

By providing on-site visits by multi-disciplinary teams to each school, children can be assessed for developmental delays at early age, receive early interventions and ongoing continuity of care by the same group of professional therapists.

At present, young children face extremely long delays in getting access to assessment, diagnosis and treatment for developmental delays. This commitment is a priority for Fianna Fáil.

We propose that the three-year Strategy should commit to increasing the number of Speech and Language therapists by about 30% (250 new speech and language therapists) as well as increase young children's access to Occupational and Physical Therapists. Such multi-disciplinary teams of

⁷ As per PQ 46244/15 reply: "the direct costs of employing an additional 100 psychologists to the National Educational Psychological Service would be approximately €7m per annum."

therapists would be available to both Mainstream and for Special Schools. The cost of employing an additional 300 therapists is in the region of €12 million, with additional establishment costs in the region of €2 million.⁸

Key Education Reforms for Special Schools

Fianna Fáil has a number of proposals for reforming special schools education.

There is a need to reform special needs teacher training. Under the current training system, teachers are not incentivised from developing specialities in special needs education. For instance, teachers cannot undertake their probation period in a special school. Fianna Fáil would not only recognise teacher probation in special schools, but we would encourage teachers to undertake their training in special schools.

It is not acceptable that, special schools do not have access to Home Liaison Officers. This is senseless; given the mix of socioeconomic backgrounds those pupils attending such schools across the country. We propose changing this by allowing Special Schools and non-DEIS mainstream schools to appoint Home Liaison Community Officers, if a need exists.

There is also a need for clearer guidance to schools on the use of good practice for dealing with behavioural issues of children with special needs. We would issue clearer guidelines to schools on the proper use of these techniques, including the introduction of greater legal clarity if necessary.

At present, the system for allocating assistive technology to schools, the Disability Assistive Technology Scheme, is overly bureaucratic and poses much too large an administrative burden on schools.

Each year, schools administrators have to spend a great deal of their time reapplying for the scheme, despite the fact that the assistive technologies being applied for are indispensable for the children in question. We propose that the three-year Strategy commit to introducing automatic entitlement for such assistive technologies.

Increasing Diversity in School Patronage

Across the country, there is an increasing mismatch between the current patronage arrangements for national schools and the wishes of parents. While 96% of Irish national schools are under denominational patronage at present and 92 % under Catholic patronage, this no longer reflects the

⁸ As per HSE reply 33477/15 employing 300 speech and language therapists would cost €14m per annum.

diverse reality of Irish society and parents' demands for greater plurality in school ethos and patronage.

To that end, in government we established the Community National School model in Government, which has been highly successful in increasing plurality and we believe should be extended.

The previous government's approach on school divestment has simply not worked, with only 6 schools transferring patronage to date. This has been due to the overly aggressive and dogmatic approach taken by both Labour Ministers of Education.

In March 2011, just weeks after becoming Minister for Education, Minister Quinn said that he believed there was a need to divest up to 1,500 primary schools from the Catholic Church and that this process should be begin in January 2012. He made this promise knowing it was not achievable .

It has now been proven as an unachievable target. By contrast, unlike Minister Quinn's target of 1,500 schools divesting, Educate Together is targeting 300-400 schools by 2030.

Our policy approach has always been to bring this issue forward in a constructive way rather than force the matter. We believe that divestment and increasing diversity in school patronage is essential and we propose engagement with all education partners to energise this process, rather than setting arbitrary or unrealistic targets as has done in the past, to little effect.

School Admissions Policies: Ensuring all Children have access to their Local School

The overwhelming focus on the long-term process of patronage divestment by the government has distracted from the more essential and immediately relevant question of how children from non-religious backgrounds should be accommodated within the present structures and the rights of all to freedom of conscience and school admission upheld.

The Equal Status Act 2000 prohibited religious discrimination in educational services. However the Act allows schools to enrol co-religionists in preference to members of other faiths where the school is oversubscribed. About 20% of schools in the country (mainly in Dublin) are over-subscribed and they are the most active in employing admissions processes and selection criteria based on religious background.

In terms of selection (enrolment) policies of existing schools, Fianna Fáil believes that no parent should have to baptise their child simply to get him/her into a school and that all children (regardless of religious denomination or outlook) should have access to a school in their local community.

We favour the introduction of selection criteria for over-subscribed schools, based on locality and catchment area. Selection rules should be based on two mandatory criteria. Firstly on a sibling first

principle, where siblings of pupils presently enrolled would be selected first. Secondly, children living in newly designated school catchment areas would have to be prioritised with access to a school place.

We favour the introduction of selection criteria for over-subscribed schools, based on locality and catchment area. We believe that it would not be against the constitutional (or the rights of minority faith schools) to allow schools to give preference to children of their denominational ethos, who are from a catchment area.

However we not believe that schools should be able to give admissions to children of their own denominational background from outside their catchment area, in preference to children of a different denomination from inside their catchment area.

Catchment Areas could be sized according to the availability of schools of different ethos. It is unlikely that this would be unconstitutional. This would mean that catchment areas could be sized according to the popularity of the schools ethos e.g. Presbyterian schools or Jewish schools would have an extremely wide catchment for admissions as there are so few of these schools in the country. This would protect them as Minority denominational schools.

This would mean that a situation could not occur where a child from outside an area could be considered for a school place before a child from the local area, even if the local child is not of the denominated religion of the school/ or is of no religion at all.

In addition, a new Schools Admissions Appeals Body should also be established within the Department of Education, where parents who suspect that their child has been discriminated against during the admissions process of a school, would have recourse to an appeal and an investigation.

Restoring School Transport to Primary and Post-Primary Schools

As a result of the changes made to the School Transport Scheme in 2011/2012, there has been an overall 20% reduction in the number of primary, post-primary and special needs students that are eligible for school transport and overall a reduction of 10% in the number of students using the scheme to get to school.

There is strong evidence that public transport use from an early age is habit forming and it is essential that we teach our school children the advantages and benefits of regular public transport use in their formative years. We believe that school transport should encouraged rather than discouraged by the introduction of exclusionary eligibility criteria.

We believe the three-year Strategy should commit to restoring pre-2011 eligibility criteria for the school transport scheme (estimated to cost €3.2m⁹), ensuring that children who are attending a school that is not their nearest school (but still within the traditional catchment area) are eligible to apply for school transport.

Improving ICT Systems in Schools

At present ICT infrastructure within schools, especially at primary level, is inadequate and under-funded. In terms of capital investment in ICT infrastructure and equipment in schools, we welcome the commitment to the level of capital expenditure outlined in the Digital Strategy, including a multi-annual budget of €210 million 2016/17 to 2021/2022.

However a pressing problem encountered by schools in this area is inadequate ICT maintenance, which regularly results in early obsolescence of equipment. There is currently no programme funding that schools can draw down for ICT upgrades, despite the fact that such upgrades are predictable and inevitable. Maintenance funding, especially, needs to be put on a more predictable basis. To do this we propose that an ICT maintenance fund - which could be worth up to 5% of a school's ICT stock per annum – be put in place in the lifetime of the Strategy.

We also propose that a better system for streamlining and centralising the ICT systems maintenance and support services in schools be considered in the Strategy. At present, individual schools procure their own ICT support services, often employing part-time contract workers. It may be possible to centralise this practice, by funding and a new coordination role to Education Training Boards in each geographic area.

The ETB could use the ICT support grants to employ ICT service teams, which can be shared between clusters of schools. We believe this has the potential to take a significant burden off school administrators as well as being a cost saving measure for schools. We anticipate the cost of both these measures annually to be approximately €6 million per annum.

Schools Capital Investment Programme

The schools capital plan announced by the government in 2015 is a lot less ambitious than the fanfare with which it was launched. This plan only returns capital expenditure to annual pre-2011 level by 2019.

While there are a number of welcome initiatives, it is unfortunate that many of the new schools and new school buildings are taking so long to complete. This will mean that many schools that have been

⁹ As per PQ 43227/15 reply restoring Eligibility to Pre-2011 criteria would cost €3.2 million based on savings from services withdrawn since 2011

promised new buildings under the capital plan will be waiting for up to six years to move classrooms from pre-fab accommodation into more suitable facilities. This is needless and the only reason this is the case is essentially as a balance sheet exercise on behalf of the previous government, who were unable to say when most of the new schools announced would be built and be operational.

Given the severe demographic pressures facing many areas, with a huge number of over-crowded classrooms and over-crowded schools with a lack of suitable accommodation, we believe there is both a requirement and an opportunity to front load the schools capital building programme expenditure in the years 2017 to 2019, which would allow schools to drastically speed up the construction of new facilities.

Ensuring Equality of Opportunity: Investing in Secondary Education

At second level education, the previous government enabled educational inequality between the most advantaged and most disadvantaged students to widen through its short-sighted decisions to cut a number of key education supports and programmes, including guidance counselling in schools, the DEIS Programme and the School Completion Programme.

The Fianna Fáil party, as the original initiator of these programmes, believes these programmes should be restored and more comprehensively supported as three vital educational programmes.

In addition to this, we believe that a number of measured curriculum changes are required at second level to support future skills development in our society and improve the employment prospects of school entrants.

Principally, we propose the introduction of new courses at junior and senior cycle in computational learning. We also propose reforms to encourage greater foreign language learning at second level.

Restoring Ex Quota Guidance Counselling to all Schools

One of Fianna Fáil's key education priorities is to restore the Ex Quota Guidance Counselling to all Schools. This has been included in our Confidence and Supply Arrangement to facilitate a Fine Gael led Minority Government so its inclusion in the new Statement of Strategy is expected.

The Education Act 1998, which was brought in by Fianna Fáil, provided a legal obligation on schools to provide appropriate guidance. In Budget 2012 the Fine Gael /Labour government agreed to allow schools to manage guidance provision within their standard teacher allocation which resulted in an effective increase in the pupil teacher ratio at second level as well as seriously undermining both counselling and counsellors.

Since then the decision has resulted in a massive 51% reduction in one-on-one counselling supports in secondary schools with the reduction even greater in disadvantaged areas.

The 51% reduction in one-on-one guidance counselling is one of the single greatest cuts in the education sector and has one of the greatest ramifications for children's future. The ESRI (2014) Leaving School in Ireland Report (based on the most extensive survey of Irish education to date) has

shown that the removal of guidance counsellors disproportionately affects the prospects of disadvantaged students.

The report found that Guidance Counsellors are a particularly strong source of support for young people from working class backgrounds and students without a family history of participation in third level. These cuts have significantly worsened social inequalities and educational disadvantage. The loss of guidance counselling services, particularly in working class schools where parental contributions and school fees are not available to replace the funding removed for guidance counselling by the State have left a disjointed and inequitable access to appropriate guidance for all our students in second level and colleges of further education

Fianna Fáil believes the role of guidance counselling is critical, broadening students' future education and career path choices. Guidance Counsellors are the only persons in a school setting professionally qualified to provide guidance counselling to students. We believe provision must be made for this vital resource and that the ex-quota guidance counsellor must be restored to all schools. This would cost approximately €30 million in a full year¹⁰.

Delivering Education Equality: Expansion and Reform of the DEIS Programme

This previous government introduced, by choice, massive cuts to supports and schemes that supported the disadvantaged. These policy decisions have prevented many communities from fully reaping the benefits of our education system.

Reducing school failure and improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils has always been a key priority in Fianna Fáil's education policy agenda. Gaps in educational outcomes, stemming from socioeconomic disadvantage, have been perpetuated by neglecting the DEIS programme as well as making cuts to other equality of opportunity programmes, such as the School Completion Programme. The three-year Strategy should commit to removing the cap on the expansion of the DEIS Programme to new schools and enhance investment in underperforming DEIS schools.

While the recent ESRI report confirms that DEIS has been effective in narrowing the gap between disadvantaged students and those from more privileged backgrounds, more work needs to be done to bring the most disadvantaged urban DEIS schools in line with all other schools.

¹⁰ As per PQ 33910/15 reply: "The net reduction in guidance provision as a consequence of this budget measure was of the order of 500 posts. The annual budget saving from this measure is over €30 million. This gives an indication of the cost involved if this budget measure was not in place."

Measures suggested by the ERSI Review of the DEIS Programme should also be implemented, in particular by enhancing funding and supports for Urban (Band 1) DEIS schools. It is estimated an expansion of DEIS by 10% would cost approximately €7 million.¹¹

Improving School Completion: Strengthening the School Completion Programme

Reducing school failure and improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils is a key priority in Fianna Fáil's education policy agenda. As a country, we need to do better to ensure certain sections of our communities more fully reap the benefits of our education system. However the previous government's record has been to reverse progress in improving educational outcomes in disadvantaged communities, decimating the Programme that has had remarkable success in improving the chances for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, the School Completion Programme.

The school completion programme, first introduced by a Fianna Fáil Government in 2002, has been identified as a model of best practice by the EU and the OECD as a targeted programme that increases retention rates in schools and reduces educational disadvantage.

Children experiencing poverty, homelessness and parental unemployment feature prominently among the children that are targeted by the school completion programme. However, enhancing school retention among these children has diminished as a goal of this government

However the service nationally has experienced a substantial cut in funding from €30 million in 2010 to €24.7 million in 2014, which has meant that many interventions, such as summer programmes, are now not available for children from disadvantage circumstances.

Fianna Fáil is committed to fully protecting the School Completion Programme, reversing the resource cuts to programmes across the country and ensuring its consolidation as a proactive, preventative programme with holistic rather than reactive, crisis determined aims. We propose restoring the Programme's educational focus by moving the SCP back into the Dept. of Education and Skills. We also propose increased supports to the School Completion Programme and reverse the €5.5 million cuts imposed on the Programme under previous government.¹²

¹¹ As per PQ 43963/15 reply "The expenditure provided by my Department to the DEIS programme at Primary level in 2014 was approximately €70m. The allocated funding for 2015 is also approximately €70m." As a result the cost of increasing funding by 10% is €7m.

¹² "As per PQ 38987/15 reply ""In 2011 the School Completion Programme Cost was €30.25 million. The School Completion budget for 2015/16 is €24.75million."" Therefore the cost of restoring it to 2011 levels is €5.5m"

Education Support Services for Children from the Traveller Community and Newcomer Children

Although very significant improvements have been made over the last fifteen years, there remain serious issues with regards educational disadvantage for children from the Traveller community. Fianna Fáil is committed to ensuring that Traveller children secure top quality education, to include outcomes (in terms of transfer to further levels and success rates) on a par with those of the settled community. In addition, it is essential that these children's experiences in education are respectful of the unique culture and mores of the Traveller community.

To ensure ongoing improvements for education outcomes among the Traveller Community, Fianna Fáil believes the three-year Strategy should commit to restoring the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers at a cost of approximately €2 million.¹³

For language support for students for whom English is not their first language, it is clear that the 'simplified' allocation process for both learning and language support introduced by Minister Quinn in 2012/2013 has led to a suppression of temporary EAL posts for many schools. EAL support is vital for newcomer children to ensure they integrate properly and to enable them to access the curriculum fully. The three-year Strategy should commit to revising the allocation criteria for EAL posts to ensure that students receive greater language support.

Equalising Secondary School Funding

Fianna Fáil is committed to free education for all. We believe that the current practice of schools being maintained by voluntary grants is inequitable and not conducive to an efficiently functioning school system. Schools are badly funded and parents are being expected to make up the shortfall, regardless of whether they can afford a voluntary contribution or not. Since 2011, the capitation grant has fallen from €200 per pupil to €173 – an 11% drop.

At the same time, equalisation funding for voluntary secondary schools has ceased since 2009 with voluntary secondary schools receiving about €90 per student less per annum than the amount allocated to community schools and an estimated €200 less per student than that allocated to Education and Training Board schools.

The way in which secondary schools in Ireland are funded is severely lack in transparency and appears inequitable.

¹³ As per PQ 43583/15 reply: "41 Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers (VTST) posts were in place with 21 of these posts in the primary education system." The cost of 21 primary teachers @€46,000 include employers PRSI) plus cost of employing 20 post primary school teachers (@€48,000 incl. employers PRSI) is €1.92m

ETBs and community/comprehensive schools receive 90% or more of their funding from government sources. Voluntary sector schools receive less than 70%. Of all schools, voluntary secondary schools are most reliant on parental contributions to help run the school

The three-year Strategy should commit to implement a gradual equalisation of funding, beginning with a significant increase in the capitation grant to voluntary/Community/comprehensive schools.

Addressing Health and Nutrition in Schools

Although Ireland is in the throes of an obesity epidemic with as many as one in five teenagers obese or overweight, it is remarkable that there is currently no national standard to ensure that healthy, tasty and nutritious foods are provided at second level; and the guidelines at Primary Level are weak.

Given that obesity is expected to reach endemic proportions amongst young people in the coming decade, much more urgent, courageous and thoughtful policy responses are required.

Currently there is no strategy, plan or guidelines from DES to ensure that children, while they are at school, are not used as captive consumers for fast and sugary food products. The reason for this is that there are no planning guidelines in place which explicitly provides for No Fry Zones within a certain perimeter of schools. We suggest putting in place specific planning protocols to ensure that no fry zones are possible to implement by schools throughout the country.

Despite repeated promises, previous Ministers have not issued any directives on vending machines in Secondary Schools. The Strategy should commit to issuing a directive to schools to remove the stocking of sugary drinks, crisps and chocolate from vending machines in schools.

Finally a number policies are required for eradicating the blight of food poverty among children and young people in schools. The Strategy should commit to expanding the School Meals Programme by 10% to reach children from disadvantaged backgrounds attending non-DEIS schools and put in place a national taskforce for monitoring progress on this issue(estimated cost €3.9 million).¹⁴

¹⁴ As per PQ 33346/15 reply "the 2015 budgetary allocation (for school meals) is €39 million." Therefore the cost of expansion by 10% is €3.9m

Curriculum Reforms at Primary and Post Primary

The following are some measured curriculum reforms we believe should be incorporated into the 3-year Strategy.

National Roll Out of Modern Languages in Primary Schools & Improving Post-Primary Language Learning

There is a need to reform the teaching and learning of foreign languages in our schools in Ireland. For a marginal saving, the previous government decided to abolish the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Programme, which had been established in more than 800 primary schools by the time Fianna Fáil left office. This was a senseless and hugely regressive step for children's education advancement.

Despite the fact that we have the highest proportion of citizens in the EU (66%) who say they do not know a second language there is now virtually no government policy to deal with this critical issue. Our ability to compete internationally, to attract FDI investment and in particular to take full advantage of the employment opportunities that the presence of multinationals has bestowed, is being damaged by the lack of a coherent strategy on the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

Despite the recognition by Dept. of Jobs and Enterprise and other state bodies, as well as the ongoing vocal demand from Multinationals about the critical deficit in language skills in the jobs market, there is no government policy on this issue.

The only actions taken to date were in August 2014 with Minister O'Sullivan launched consultation on foreign languages in Irish education. However the remit of this consultation is inadequate and misguided, with the focus on expansion of L3 language group in post-primary education. Critically it does not include foreign language education at primary level.

We believe that the critical reason for the shortage of foreign language skills among the population is the virtual absence of language education at primary level. In Ireland, only 7% of 10 years olds learn a foreign language at school, compared to 75% in UK. This has to change, and we propose develop a

clear framework for integrated language education in Ireland, starting with the introduction of foreign language from an early age at primary school. In government Fianna Fáil introduced the Modern Language in Primary Schools pilot programme, which involves the teaching of modern languages via the sharing of tutors between clusters of primary schools.

Fianna Fáil proposes a number of measures to encourage and develop foreign language education.

Firstly, the Strategy should re-establish the Modern Languages in Primary School Programme and ensure its introduction to all primary schools nationwide. We recommend expanding this programme on a national basis, at a cost of €12.6 million.¹⁵

Secondly, the Strategy should make the learning of a foreign language up to Leaving Certificate level compulsory. At present, it is anomalous that Ireland is the only country in Europe (apart from Scotland) where foreign language is not compulsory.

Finally, it is also critical that modern languages be treated as a priority subject at second and third level, especially development of certain L3 languages (specifically German, French, Spanish, Italian, Mandarin Chinese, Russian and Arabic). This can be done by giving Universities a 'top-up' payment per student enrolled in a course teaching any of these languages as a component, estimated to cost in the region of €450,000.

Rolling-Out of Irish Partial Immersion Programmes across Schools

As a party, we are firmly committed to the implementation of the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language which we brought forward while in government.

The headline goal of the strategy has been set of increasing over 20 years the number of people with knowledge of Irish from the current 1.66 million to 2 million; and the number of daily speakers of Irish from the current level of approximately 83,000 to 250,000.

Fundamental to improving both fluency and vibrancy of the Irish language is to maintain it as a living language. Fianna Fáil believes that we must increase on an incremental basis the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language. It is also our objective that as many citizens as possible are bilingual in both Irish and English.

The key to enhancing the role of Irish as a vibrant, living language in society is to improve the effectiveness of language teaching in Primary schools, and in particular to increase availability and

¹⁵ As per PQ 46295/15 reply "The Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI) was introduced into 550 primary schools in September 1998. It involved the introduction of Italian, Spanish, German and French for 5th and 6th classes. The MLPSI was a pilot scheme with an annual budget of approximately €2.5m." The cost of expanding it to 3,284 primary schools is therefore €12.5m.

access to Irish Language partial Immersion Programmes, where 50% of subjects are taught through Irish.

Research by the NCCA has found support by 24% parents for some form of immersion, however schools, teachers and parents currently face major obstacles in designing and setting up courses taught either partially or fully through Irish.

The Strategy should commit to helping schools with resources support, structures, training and materials to put these in place where there is a demand for partial immersion courses by schools, parents and students.

Alcohol and Drugs Education, Prevention & Early Intervention

Responsibility for Alcohol and Drugs awareness and education programmes is currently disjointed, with responsibility falling between a number of agencies including the HSE/Garda/Youth Services. To ensure that students receive a more consistent and comprehensive substance misuse education, we propose that the Department of Education and Skills becomes the Department fully responsible for delivering these programmes.

To improve the consistency of substance misuse education across schools, we propose examining best practice schools based programmes to support Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) such as the Headstrong ‘Help-Seeking’ schools-based substance misuse programme (currently in pilot phase) which we believe should be rolled-out on a national basis.

School is a venue in which early signs of substance misuse become visible and can be addressed. We propose to establish ‘Identification and Engagement Teams’ in schools, in conjunction with appropriate youth related services, to identify the most at risk young people in order to interrupt their potential trajectory into problem drug and alcohol use and associated activities.,

Children in school often bear the marks of parental substance misuse. These children have been some of the greatest victims of the severe cuts to guidance services and pastoral care within schools.

As part of the restoration of guidance services across secondary level schools, the Strategy should commit to establishing adjunct family supports and pastoral programmes for children impacted by parental substance misuse.

Protecting History as a Compulsory Subject at Junior Cycle

Fianna Fáil believes that history must be a key component of the Junior Cert education. We should all be deeply concerned at any syllabus changes that resulted in a sharp reduction in the numbers

studying history as a core subject in post-primary schools. We welcome the reform of the junior certificate and believe there are many things which can be improved in the curriculum.

However the subject History, it is clear from these proposals, may not be taught under this curriculum in a systematic, thorough or meaningful way and can be ignored if that is the choice of the school. The Strategy should make a commitment to ensure that history as a subject is not diluted and downgraded as a subject and that it continues to form part of the core curriculum.

Physical Education and Sports Classes

It is extremely worrying from the point of view of Public Health, that young women show much lower activity levels and participation in sport than young men, with only 43% of 16 to 25 year olds playing a sport compared to 63% males.

While participation rates in Sport are almost at parity for younger kids – both male and female – from adolescence onwards we see a massive disparity opening up.

This situation has much to do with the frequently poor level of physical education and sports participation in many schools. We are rated as 3rd worst amongst all EU countries for primary level physical education and 7th worst for second level. In many schools and clubs at a certain age, during adolescence, girls are being turned off sports.

At present, PE at Primary level is too variable across schools and depends upon the willingness and ability of individual teachers and/or the facilities available. PE teachers are a rarity within Primary Schools.

We propose establishing a network of professional PE teachers, to be shared between schools, to work with teachers in developing PE schedules and plans for within primary schools. To achieve this we propose that the Strategy put in place a pilot programme which would employ a pool of approximately 100 new PE teachers (1 per 100 schools), to be shared in clusters between primary schools, at a cost of €2.8 million.¹⁶

In secondary schools we ensure that all students participate in the two hours mandatory physical activity. However, as well as including PE classes for developing basic physical literacy among teenagers, we believe the Strategy should commit to introducing a pilot scheme to commence Sports Classes in a pool of schools.

Sports Classes offer a unique strategy for re-engaging students – including adolescent females – who may have given up on physical activity through lack of interest in existing sports on offer.

¹⁶ As per PQ 46241/15 reply "The average cost of a post-primary teacher employed before January 2011, is €48,822 pa." This cost is based on recruiting 95 new PE teachers, 60 for Primary and 35 for secondary

Such intra-circular sports classes have been introduced to good effect in other countries. These classes can be composed of more varied individual and niche sports or physical activities (such as dancing), expanding the choice of physical pursuits in schools beyond the traditional team sports environments which, according to the Irish Sports Monitor, are not as attractive to females in this age group. We anticipate that this would require the employment of additional PE teachers in secondary schools, at a cost of €2 million.¹⁷

Future Skills Curriculum: Introduction of Computer Science Education in Schools

There is a strong need for better Computer Science skills from industry, and greater numbers of graduates. Despite the presence of high tech multinationals, there is no computer science education at secondary level in Ireland and as a result, there are advanced skills shortages in the high tech sector.

Learning data and computing languages is like learning a foreign language: the younger you start the better. This is one reason why the government's only initiative to increase the number of computer science graduates, by giving a capitation top-up to third level institutes for each computer science graduate they churn out, has been a failure. The reason why is that it is difficult for students to take-up computational learning at a late stage.

The low supply of computer science graduates has led to significant wage inflation in the sector, which has a particularly negative effect on our indigenous tech sector. The high salaries offered to computer science graduates cannot be approximated by domestic start-ups, which has the effect of leading a dangerous concentration of Ireland's tech economy in the multi-national sector and has a stifling effect on entrepreneurship in the sector.

For this reason, Fianna Fáil proposes the introduction of basic Computational Science curriculum at primary level, with the introduction of a more advance curriculum at Junior and Senior Cycles at second level. Based on a similar initiative introduced in the UK we estimate the cost of the introduction of a computing curriculum at primary level to be in the region of €3 million per annum.¹⁸

We propose the introduction of a similar curriculum to that introduced in Israel and the UK. At primary level in the UK a new mixed technology skills curriculum has been introduced, which puts less emphasis on ICT learning and greater emphasis on a strong theoretical curriculum. Since

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ As per PQ 46239/15 reply "The current estimated cost of employing an entry grade teacher, including the cost of Employer's PRSI, is: primary school - €46,000; and secondary school - €48,800." Estimate is based on employing 50 staff @ €46,000 plus €650,000 for development of new curriculum (euro equivalent) of expenditure in UK <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/microsoft-google-and-ibm-to-help-train-computing-teachers>

September 2014, students in England are studying computer science at both primary and secondary level. The goal of this curriculum is that by age of 11, children should be fluent in two programming languages.

The UK government is bridging the knowledge gap among teachers by recruiting and funding a network of 400 master computer science teachers to liaise with the universities, to teach teachers, to develop materials and to deliver the new curriculum to schools across the country. Without action here, there is a real risk of the Ireland could be left behind in terms computer science literacy, which encompasses key skills for the future.

We propose the introduction of a mixed theory/ practical computer learning curriculum, to replace the out-dated 'hardware' information technology curriculum and emphasis of the current ICT courses at primary and secondary.

Safeguarding Quality, Accessibility and Sustainability in Third Level Education

The three-year Strategy will have to commit to making significant investments in improving teaching quality and in research at third level. Significant increases in maintenance support for both undergraduates and postgraduates to remove financial barriers to a third level education which have arisen over the last number of years.

Affordability for Third Level Students

While Exchequer grant funds have drained away from universities, students have progressively been paying higher tuition fees (in the form of the Student Contribution Fee) for an increasingly less comprehensive, quality education.

The last five years have seen an increase in the student contribution of €2175 or 263%—from €825 in 2007/08 to €2,750 in 2014/15, total income per student decreased by 22 %, while the capital funding to universities has decreased by almost 50 % since 2012. In September 2016, the financial pressures on free fee students will increase further with an additional €250 increase bring the charge to €3,000. HEIs are relying upon these increased financial contributions from students to make up for their reduced revenue from public sources, however the current student contribution represents a significant up front charge for students, and there is clear evidence that this high rate is beginning to serve as a financial barrier to participation in third level education.

There is absolutely no justification for increasing fees for the foreseeable future, and Fianna Fáil is committed to ensuring registration fees are frozen at their current levels.

While a €3,000 student contribution fee on its own might not be a prohibitive expense for students (or their families), the maintenance cost of attending university can act as a prohibitive and exclusionary barrier for many potential students. In particular, there is a need to reduce the financial cost burden for students from families whose income falls just above the threshold to avail of Student Support Grants. Several studies¹⁹ have shown that the removal of fees for higher education in 1996 has not been sufficient in narrowing the social class differential in higher education participation.

¹⁹ McCoy and Smyth (2011) and Denny (2010)

This is likely due to the fact that other direct costs facing individuals, such as the cost of maintenance and accommodation, have remained high. This is especially the case for students whose family income is just above the threshold for a student support grant and consequently receive no financial state assistance with either the cost of tuition or the cost of maintenance.

Travel distance, in particular, is an important factor in driving socioeconomic inequalities in higher education participation²⁰. The stark geographic inequalities in terms of accessibility to higher education are due to the higher direct and indirect costs for potential students from farther distances. Moreover, these higher costs are borne disproportionately by those from lower social classes who face much lower levels of participation in higher education as a result.

The change to the grant eligibility limit for the non-adjacent (partial) grant from 24 km or more to 45km or more from the approved institution has exacerbated the effect of distance on participation for those from lower social classes.

The three year Strategy should consider the proposal of linking student maintenance grant to the CPI will ensure that the maintenance grant will increase with the cost of living including accommodation, food and energy. This will ensure maintenance grant rates by steady increments almost annually. We estimate this would cost approximately 12.5 million per annum.²¹

In addition, we believe there is a need to double the Student Assistance Fund for those in financial distress (cost €4.7m).²² This fund used at the discretion of universities to help those who fall into financial distress during the academic year and cannot afford to continue their studies.

Ensuring Access to Post Graduate Study

The removal of grants for postgraduate education was inconsistent with the government's stated policy that it was building a high skill, 'smart' economy.

There has been a reduction of 5% in overall new postgraduate entrants since 2013. Moreover the removal of the postgraduate grant has affected those on lowest incomes most. It has compounded inequality, by creating a comparative advantage for those whose families can provide them with financial support for a Masters degrees or equivalent and to gain credentials that are increasingly required to make one professionally employable in many walks of life.

²⁰ Cullinan et al. (2013)

²¹ As per PQ 41556/15 reply " an increase in the maintenance support grant and special rate maintenance grant to students for the 2015/16 academic year based on the averages outlined above, the estimated cost to the exchequer would be an additional €2.5m (CPI) or €1.7m".

²² This is a fixed allocation. AS per PQ 33911/15 table, an increase in the Student Assistance Fund to its peak of €11 million in 2012/2013, would cost €4.7 million.

As per the Confidence and Supply Arrangement to facilitate a Fine Gael led Minority Government, the three-year Strategy must increase financial supports for post graduate students with a particular focus on those from low income households. This would cost in the region of €47 million.²³

Enhancing Quality and Sustainability of Higher Education Institutions

Since 2010, there has been a 22 % decrease in Exchequer support to meet Higher Education Institutions' (HEI) day-to-day costs. Over the same period, higher education student numbers have increased by 25,000 while staff numbers have dropped by over 2,000 - a 15 % increase in student numbers along with a 12 % drop in staff numbers. Core expenditure for each student is down by 15 % while the total income per student received by HEIs dropped by 22 %.

This has resulted in sharp deterioration, in the staff/student ratio from 1:15 to 1:19.5 – a key indicator of the quality of teaching – increased dramatically from 1:15 to 19:1, compared with an average 1:14 across the rest of the OECD

There has been virtually no new State investment in buildings and research facilities since 2008 when Fianna Fáil was in power, with an estimated 40 % of the Higher Education system's infrastructure now consider below standard, according to a report by HEA.

Overall the units of funding per typical student has declined by almost €2000 under this government. Annual government spending on Research and Development has fallen by €200m, from €938m in 2008 to €734m in 2014

While the HEI for the most part have been coping, by doing 'more with less', the current resource situation in Irish universities, ITs and colleges is unsustainable, especially in light of demographic pressures, with student numbers at higher education expected to grow by at least 25% by 2028.

Increased exchequer support to universities and IoTs is required to improve quality. Importantly the grant increase should be allocated on a per student basis with exchequer (recurrent) funding in real terms (i.e. above demographic increases) to universities to improve student: lecturer ratios, small group teaching & research output.

The three-year Strategy should commit to increasing the Recurrent Grant to Higher Education Institutions to enhance teaching, lecturer/student ratios and research output to a target of about €100 million to 120 million per annum²⁴.

²³ As per PQ 33912/15 reply "If the Budget 2012 decision was reversed and the income thresholds increased to bring them into line with those for undergraduate students, then the potential cost is estimated to be in the region of €47m".

²⁴ As per PQ 11024/15 reply the "The current expenditure figures above include recurrent funding (core grant and free fees), funding provided under the Student Grant Scheme, higher education research funding and other higher education funding" for 2015 was provisionally set at €1.38bn." We propose to increase this to €1.5bn, an increase of €120m.

In addition the Strategy needs to commit to putting in place a new 5-Year Capital Investment & Research Programme (PRTLII) Fund.

Under the previous government, capital funding to universities/ITs was reduced by by 50% and research funding by €200 million.

The Strategy will have to commit to putting in place a new Five Year cycle of the Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions including a funding package for Capital Investment, Refurbishment and Research Projects. We expect this will receive equal matching funding from Private Sector (as historically has been the case). This should be in the order of approximately €296 million.²⁵

The purpose of this Scheme will be to provide a fund to develop new projects as well as to refurbish projects for which PRTLII provided funding under the various schemes introduced by Fianna Fail. In broad terms, this will be conducted along the same lines as the PRTLII and will be linked to stated strategic objectives and outcomes which reflect the priorities of any given institution as well as State policy.

²⁵ This is Fixed Allocation for Investment in Buildings and Equipment over Five Year Cycle 2017-2021 under the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions once current scheme ends in 2016.