

How well does the Education service meet the needs of children and students?

The primary school system in Ireland is operating well albeit in a very challenging context. Despite funding, staffing and resource shortfalls, reports show high levels of parental and pupil satisfaction with primary education and high standards of teaching and learning in primary schools.

A relatively stable cohort of teacher numbers over recent years has absorbed a very significant increase in pupil numbers resulting in a deteriorating pupil teacher ratio and an increased class size, reduced provision for children with special needs and significantly reduced programmes of support for Traveller children and the teaching of modern languages. As a result Irish classes remain the highest in the Eurozone at 25 pupils per class compared to an EU 21 average of 21 pupils per class.

Overall spending on primary education grew slightly in recent years reflecting increased pupil enrolment. However teachers, and in particularly newly appointed teachers, have seen a significant salary decrease making pay equality and income recovery key issues. OECD research shows that Irish primary teachers earn approximately 80% of the salary of similarly qualified graduates.

A 15% decrease in capitation funding to schools over the period of austerity has put all schools in financial difficulties with many schools avoiding this jeopardy only through significant voluntary contributions/fundraising. Lowest spending in education is to be found at primary level. For every €8 spent on a primary pupil €11 is spent at second level and €15 at third level (OECD Education at a Glance 2015). The provision of sufficient funding to bring primary to the same level as post-primary and to meet the total running costs of school is a priority issue.

The moratorium on promoted posts of responsibility is a major challenge for the education system. The continued imposition of this financial emergency measure is limiting career prospects for teachers, adversely affecting the leadership/management of schools and having a negative impact on the implementation of initiatives in schools. It must be tackled as a matter of priority.

Primary teachers have co-operated with an ambitious programme of change in education including the literacy and numeracy strategy, school self-evaluation and new forms of inspection in schools.

Parental satisfaction with primary education is strong. In surveys carried out by the Inspectorate 97% of parents agree that teaching in their child's school is good with similar numbers of parents agreeing that their child was doing well in school. 95% of parents agree that their child's school is welcoming. 92% of parents felt that school reports gave them a good picture of their child's progress.

Inspectorate reports point to high quality teaching in primary schools. For example in English, teaching in 90% of lessons was found to be satisfactory or better.

Irish primary pupils performed very well in the most recent PIRLS assessment of Literacy. Ireland's reading score was significantly above the PIRLS scale centre-point. Ireland in 10th position was only a few points, not a meaningful difference, from the four preceding countries. 31 other countries including Germany, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand were out performed by Ireland.

In Mathematics Ireland's TIMMS score was significantly above the TIMMS centre-point. Ireland was in 17th position in the TIMMS mathematical table. Ireland's mean score for TIMMS was significantly higher than the mean for 33 countries including Australia, New Zealand, Italy and Sweden.

In Science Ireland's overall score was significantly above the scales centre-point.

Last year significant improvements in Literacy and Numeracy were published. This is a tribute to the work of primary teachers under difficult conditions. Despite cuts to education budgets primary schools exceeded expectations and delivered improvements in these key areas.

In national assessments, reading overall performance in 2nd and 6th classes was significantly higher in 2014 compared to 2009 by 14 score points and 13 score points respectively. In 2014 there were few lower achieving pupils in the system and more higher achievers in both 2nd and 6th classes.

In mathematics performance in 2nd and 6th classes was significantly higher in 2014 than in 2009 by 14 and 12 points respectively.

Irish primary teachers have far more teaching hours than their counterparts in other countries. Irish teachers teach for 915 hours per year compared to EU 21 average of 772 hours per year.

Within existing resources more can be done by the DES to manage workflows and information to schools in an orderly manner.

Prioritising the early years

The recognition of the importance of early years education is welcomed.

The INTO notes the proposal to increase the school entry age to five years of age. Over the last number of years there has been a gradual increase in the school entry age driven by the provision of a year's pre-school education. While supporting the

introduction of a second year of pre-school education the INTO opposes the imposition of an outright ban on enrolment below the age of five as this will remove parental choice and restrict children's educational placement.

It is the view of the INTO that any proposal relating to enrolment age should be implemented flexibly, leaving the ultimate choice with parents to enrol their own children at four or at five depending on their children's readiness for school.

The INTO recognises that the commitment to provide a second year of pre-school education will require significant investment in the sector in terms of developing the infrastructure needed to accommodate this additional year and recruiting and training a sufficiently large cohort of trained staff to deliver the additional year.

There should be pre-school facilities on the campus of primary schools which would be of significant benefit to parents and enhance continuity between pre-school and primary education.

The INTO argues that a number of options should be explored such as the introduction of a middle infants year in primary school or the introduction of a pre-junior infants year in primary school, expansion of early start units in disadvantaged areas alongside the provision of early years education and that all models of provision should be evaluated prior to deciding on a particular model.

There is a significant capacity issue in the early year's sector to deliver on the provision of a second pre-school year. In places there is spare capacity in primary schools that would enable the delivery of pre-school education. Where this is the case it should be explored and facilitated at local level.

The INTO welcomes the commitment to reduce the PRT in junior and senior infant classes but cautions that gains from smaller classes are only effective when such reductions are meaningful and class sizes are reduced to less than 20.

The INTO also notes and welcomes the general commitment to reduce primary school class sizes.

Tackling Disadvantage

The review of DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) should be completed in time for implementation in September 2017.

A new process for identifying schools that need additional resources to support children at risk of poverty and social exclusion should be put in place to enable new schools to qualify for additional resources annually. New schools that require additional resources arising from their educational profile have not been able to access the current DEIS Support Programme. The identification process should be open, fair and transparent.

A lower pupil-teacher ratio should apply to all DEIS schools. At present only DEIS Band One schools have a lower pupil-teacher ratio. All DEIS schools need a significantly improved pupil-teacher ratio as DEIS schools were the only schools not to benefit from the improved staffing schedule announced in last year's budget.

The most disadvantaged schools should revert to the PTR that applied under 'Breaking the Cycle', which was 15:1 in junior classes and 20:1 in senior classes. The current DEIS PTR of 20:1 in junior classes and 24:1 in senior classes should apply to other schools in DEIS.

Home School Community Liaison teachers should be available to DEIS schools, both urban and rural and support for the role of HSCL teachers should be continued.

Professional Development supporting literacy and numeracy should continue to be available to all DEIS schools, including Reading Recovery, Maths Recovery, Mata sa Rang, First Steps, Write to Read.

An additional support teacher should be available in all DEIS schools to support children with socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties. The services of CAMHS should also be restructured to ensure that all children requiring support and/or counselling can avail of such support, perhaps even within the school. There is insufficient support available to support children with emotional and behavioural difficulties under the current DEIS support programme.

The schools meals programme should continue to be available and improved to enable hot meals to be provided where required. The provision of a schools meals programme should enable schools to respond to the needs of children who come to school hungry. To enable schools to provide school meals, school buildings need to be designed with kitchens and food storage facilities. Schools also require additional staff to administer and organise school meals, before, during and after school.

Capitation grants for DEIS schools should be increased. Many schools currently use their additional funding to cover the shortfall in the school's current expenditure. Additional funding is required to enable the pupils to engage in extra-curricular activities and school excursions as part of a broad and balanced curriculum.

Early Start, the intensive early intervention programme for children in the most disadvantaged areas, should be extended to all DEIS schools. Consideration should be given to providing the second year of the free pre-school year as part of the primary school, where space is available. Enabling the second year of pre-school to be provided in the primary school would have the advantage of ensuring the children have a qualified primary teacher and an extended period of pre-school, equivalent to the infant school day. High quality early intervention for at risk pupils pays dividends (Heckman.

There are disadvantaged children in all schools. Approximately half of all disadvantaged children do not attend a DEIS school. The School Completion Programme, which has been shown to be effective and cost efficient, should be extended to more schools. School based delivery of services should continue as the preferred model for the School Completion Programme.

A starting point should be the reinstatement of teaching staff lost to DEIS schools during the period of austerity and a reinstatement of all DEIS grants including the School Completion Programme. The INTO notes proposals to consider a package of measures to benefit children impacted by disadvantage.

Children who don't speak English or Irish as their first language are at a significant disadvantage in schools and require additional support. EAL posts cut from the system in recent years must be reinstated.

Diversity and Choice for Parents

The INTO recognised the need for policy/system level change to match the efforts of primary teachers to accommodate increased diversity and was the first organisation to call for the establishment of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector.

The INTO which made a submission to the Forum supports its recommendations

The INTO is of the view that the proposal to increase the number of non-denominational and multi-denominational schools to 400 by 2030 is under-ambitious, will not meet the needs of a changing society and should be reviewed upwards.

All schools must be socially and culturally inclusive and so there must be a review of school admissions policies with a particular focus on the Equal Status Act, Section 7.3(c).

School buildings should be divested to the state which should decide future patronage based on community wishes. As far as possible the state should protect the right of parents to send children to nearest school and ensure all schools can accommodate diversity to the greatest possible extent.

Teacher education needs to be reconfigured so that colleges can enable teachers to work in a variety of school settings.

There is little merit in system that requires large numbers of children bussed to school or transported in private cars. Neither is economically or environmentally sustainable.

The INTO pointed out that Rules 68 and 69 of Rules for National Schools were in conflict and that the time for religion cannot be fixed if a religious spirit must inform and vivify the whole work of the school. The DES must act to provide clarity on this matter.

The provisions of Section 37 (1) even as recently amended are unnecessary and should be repealed. Section 16 of the Employment Equality Acts offers sufficient protections to employers.

The INTO supports the inclusion of ERB and Ethics in the primary school curriculum as part of an overall review of the primary curriculum. The INTO is adamant that there is no room in the current curriculum for additional content or subjects. It is only by reducing the content of the current curriculum that time will be available for the inclusion of ERB and Ethics.

The INTO supports the introduction of agreed procedures under Section 28 of the Education Act and of agreed procedures related to fitness to teach. The role and power of an Ombudsman for Education as a mechanism to appeal a decision of a Board needs further discussion.

The proposals relating to the use of standardised tests appear to be directly opposed to Junior Cert reform at second level. The INTO opposes the use of a single test and will

oppose attempts to impose a single test date on primary schools. Standardised tests cannot be used to test initiatives. Government needs to test the efficacy of policy initiatives over a significant period of time using a variety of methods.

Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools

The INTO is bemused by the archaic reference to “arithmetic”.

The INTO welcomes proposals to set out capitation rates to schools on a rolling 3-year basis, allowing for forward planning provided these are accompanied by real increases. School funding has been cut by 15 per cent in recent years.

The INTO does not support the proposal that school management would have the decision making power to allocate these resources to posts of responsibility and believes that these posts should be available in all schools as part of a national career structure for teachers.

There is an outstanding salary award due to primary school leaders which must be honoured. Those charged with leading the promotion of excellence and innovation in schools must be treated equally with colleagues undertaking similar work.

Devolving more autonomy to schools

Irish primary schools already have a significant degree of autonomy relative to other education systems and this is affirmed by the Education Act (1998). There has been no call among the education community in Ireland for greater autonomy for schools. Neither is there evidence to support the proposal that granting greater autonomy would benefit school communities.

The INTO rejects, emphatically and unequivocally, the neo liberal ideology of education which focuses on markets, competition and measuring of performance data as the means by which the effectiveness of schools is monitored, assessed and evaluated.

The argument that granting greater autonomy to schools will improve student outcomes or be of benefit to the school community is an ideological one not supported by evidence. Other factors such as the instructional leadership of the principal, the qualifications and practice of teachers and the engagement of parents are much more influential.

The INTO will not support initiatives in respect of autonomy which increase the workload of principals and teachers and/or cause a deterioration in their conditions of service.

It is totally unrealistic to propose enhanced duties and responsibilities for Boards of Management. There is a serious query in relation to the capacity of Boards to oversee complex legal, building and personnel issues at present.

At present, teachers meet formally with parents once per year; they provide written reports to parents yearly, and parental comments on the work of the school are made informally on a regular basis. Parents have expressed a high degree of satisfaction with information provided by schools.

The INTO favours a broad curricular framework so that there is a consistency with regard to the learning experiences which pupils encounter and there is not a wide disparity from school to school with regard to the subjects being offered or not being offered. The continuing autonomy for schools to decide on the most appropriate pedagogical approaches within this broad framework is supported by the INTO.

The level of investment by the State in the systematic development of the professional skills of school leaders has been minimal. Before countenancing any changes to school governance, it is essential that middle management posts are reinstated and adequate ancillary staff provided so that principals are supported in their increasingly complex roles as school leaders.

The INTO is of the view that teachers should be trusted to engage in professional development as required. A mandatory requirement could lead to a box-ticking exercise to ensure compliance with regulations at the expense of teacher goodwill which underpins much of teachers' current engagement in ongoing professional development.

Teachers are already engaged in School Self-Evaluation which equates with school development planning. The INTO opposes additional requirements to draw up five- year development plans, to provide more information for parents prior to enrolment in schools, to publish annual reports and evaluate their performance year on year under a 'new system of self-evaluation'.

The INTO favours the continuation of the central payroll system for teachers and SNAs. The INTO recommends that all school staff are paid on the basis of a national pay policy from a central pay-roll system.

Proposed Excellence Fund

The INTO does not support the concept of schools competing against each other to access funding as appears to be the case with the proposed School Excellence Fund.

In establishing this fund a portion of the education budget is essentially being held back to be allocated on the basis of bids received from schools. The overall result of schools pitted against each other for funding is predictably that there are winners and losers.

Many schools in other jurisdictions have made bidding an art form and have engaged specialist professional consultants to assist them. These have to be paid, thus decreasing the amount of money that actually ends up in schools.

Excessive, bureaucratic, time consuming and wasteful workload, particularly from principal teachers in preparing bids will be the inevitable result. It would be a travesty if Irish schools are diverted from core tasks such as teaching and learning to bid for necessary funding.

ICT in Schools

The approach to ICT in primary schools over successive years has been uneven, haphazard, unstructured and well down the list of government priorities. ICT in primary education has been grossly underfunded. As a result school boards cannot plan for the use of ICT in classrooms.

The ban on promotions in primary schools is hampering the use of ICT. Large class sizes are an effective barrier to the integration of ICT at primary level.

A key challenge at primary level in the vast majority of primary schools is grossly inadequate broadband. When compared to the broadband infrastructure at second level, Irish primary schools are significantly disadvantaged in terms of harnessing the power of internet technologies to enhance teaching and learning.

The Digital Strategy must provide investment in up-to-date technology in all schools with operating and technical support costs built into that funding. The strategy must prioritise high-speed reliable broadband to primary schools, re-establish middle management posts in primary schools and develop digital content to support the Irish curriculum with a particular emphasis on Irish language content. There must be a particular emphasis on professional development for teachers and on the use of ICT for

students with special needs. Consideration should be given to incentivise schools to achieve Digital Schools of Distinction Status.

Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students

The curriculum must focus on the future needs, abilities and capacity of students. At the same time it must enabling children to live full lives as children.

The INTO re-iterates its support for the aims of the primary school curriculum:

- To enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his/her potential as a unique individual;
- To enable the child to develop as a social being through living and cooperating with others and so contribute to the good of society, and
- To prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning.

The primary school curriculum has a particular vision for primary education supported by the INTO. The curriculum celebrates the uniqueness of the child, recognising each child personality, intelligence and potential for development. It is designed to nurture the child in all dimensions, spiritual, morale, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical. It specifically recognises the integrity of the child's life as a child and aims to cater for his/her needs and potential as they evolve day by day, thus enriching the child's life and laying the foundations for happiness and fulfilment in later life.

The curriculum seeks to balance individual and social development in the context of the child in society. The curriculum reflects the education, cultural, social and economic aspirations and concerns of Irish society, takes cognisance's of the changing nature of knowledge and society and the needs of individual children in adjusting to such change.

It is clear that the business model of education is incompatible with this vision of primary education. It is essential that the child-centeredness vision of the primary school curriculum is protected and retained. The INTO has in the last three decades had a significant impact on curriculum development. In the last 20 years through the NCCA which is currently conducting a review of the primary school curriculum, the INTO is supportive of such a review accepting that curriculum is not static but needs to be carefully reviewed by all the education partners.

The teaching and learning of Irish is a particular challenge. The INTO demands DES support for the full implementation of the revised language curriculum at primary level. Comprehensive whole school professional development and whole-school planning days should accompany the introduction of the revised language curriculum.

The INTO supports the aims of the literacy and numeracy strategy.

Arts education is an integral part of the primary school curriculum. Funding to support its further implementation is urgently required.

Proposals to evaluate transition supports available to young people at all levels of the education are welcome. A commitment to provide the required resources will be required to make a real difference in the lives of young people at these crucial stages of education.

Current standardised tests used in Primary Schools – Drumcondra Tests, Sigma and Micra - need to be updated to reflect recent developments in curriculum. It is important that schools retain the choice of deciding which standardised tests to use and when to use them in accordance with general national guidelines relating to their use.

Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities

The INTO welcomes the commitment to deliver a school capital investment programme for extensions/refurbishments, additional school places, and eliminating the use of prefabs. These have been key demands of the Organisation for many years.

It is essential that further funding be sourced to ensure the repair and upgrading of school buildings. Despite investment over recent years many school buildings do not conform to modern standards. The government has a responsibility to ensure that funding is provided to enable schools to be maintained to a modern standard.

Significant capital funding is required to provide for new schools where needed, but it does not make economic sense to build new schools while at the same time allowing other schools to deteriorate. Saving on necessary refurbishment and maintenance is a false economy.

The INTO notes the commitment to maintain an annual application process for the Minor Works and Summer Works schemes. The retention of an annual application scheme for Summer Works is welcome. Applications received but not approved in any given year should be kept on file in the DES and schools should not be required to resubmit applications for works annually.

The INTO does not support an annual application process for the Minor Works scheme and believes this should be paid annually to schools on the basis of enrolment as is currently the case. An annual application process would waste time and effort at school level and be cumbersome and bureaucratic to manage centrally.

Proposals to improve safety measures for primary schools such as car parks and bus lay-bys are welcome.

The INTO notes the proposals that schools buildings be utilised out of school hours for afterschool care, homework clubs and other community activities and that this be supported by additional capitation funding.

The INTO cautions against broad assumption that schools are empty buildings when children go home at the end of teaching time and can therefore be readily used for after school care. Neither are primary schools in the main, ready-made child care facilities. Any plan to extend the use of educational assets in communities must take account of how schools function, the facilities available in schools and recognise that in many cases these are busy places up until 4pm or 5pm each afternoon.

Classrooms are in use by many teachers for individual and collective preparation and planning for a number of hours after pupils leave for the day.

Schools have to be cleaned and made ready for the next day's teaching when children leave.

Minor repairs are often undertaken in the late afternoon to minimise disruption to learning.

Many primary schools run voluntary after-schools activities such as choir, Gaelic games, Irish dancing and basketball, at different times of the year. If the space is being used by other groups it could compromise some of these activities.

School halls (even when free) are not always suitable for after school care.

Any plan would need to take account of school transport arrangements which currently operate around (or close to) current school opening and closing times.

Summer holidays care provision would need to take account of July provision, school summer camps, summer works, major cleaning and repair work.

Schools would need a facility to give children a hot meal/snack after school and a hall to allow children to move around if evenings are short or weather inclement.

Special Needs Education (SEN)

The cut of 15% in the allocation of resource hours for pupils with SEN should be reversed with immediate effect.

A new model for the allocation of additional teachers to support pupils with SEN, which is currently being piloted, should not lead to a reduction of resources in the system. Given the general increase in population, additional teaching support will be required.

Therapy services, such as Speech and Language and Occupational therapy should be available for children in schools. The INTO notes the proposal to introduce a new model of In-School Speech and Language Therapy and will consider the matter constructively when more detail of the proposal is published. There is potential if the model is effectively and professionally staffed to develop a school based model that will deliver effective services for children with speech and language difficulties in their locality.

The INTO does not support the concept of cutting supports to children with special educational needs and in some way ameliorating this loss through the extension of the July Provision Programme to support families over summer months. Both should be available to children on the basis of need.

The INTO supports a commitment to progress the statutory implementation of the EPSEN Act.

Additional resources for NEPS to ensure earlier intervention for young children will be welcome if backed by a commitment to resources for children where needed. Increased support in cases of critical incidents is welcome but more needs to be done to support schools in developing preventative programmes and implementing programmes of mental health awareness.