

**Sinn Féin Submission to Education Strategy Consultation
Process Wednesday 8th June 2016**

Foreword

I welcome the opportunity to engage in the consultation process established by the current Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, in relation to the creation of an educational strategy under the current Programme for Government.

Education is unfortunately, an area that has suffered hugely as a result of significant underinvestment and harsh cutbacks in recent years. Supports for children with special needs have been cut so that they now have less time with the Special Needs Assistants and Resource Teachers. Student Fees have been increased and grant supports have been cut, meaning many third level students have had to leave their courses.

Students are being taught in overcrowded classrooms while principals are finding it more and more difficult to cover the basic costs of running a school, such as paying for light, heat and insurance. Increasingly the costs of “free education” are being passed on to parents and are presenting a real burden to those children of lower and middle income families.

Guidance counselling services have been cut dramatically, leaving children from less well-off backgrounds at a major disadvantage. Access to education for children from lower socio-economic groups and those with special needs continues to be at a lower rate than the rest of the population, while legal provisions exist which allow children to be refused access to their local school on religious grounds.

As a teacher with over 12 years of classroom experience, I am well aware of the impact of successive cutbacks on our children and on our teachers, who are becoming increasingly demoralised in the face of deteriorating terms and conditions as decreasing resources mean they are continuously required to do more with less.

It is in this context that I submit this paper to the Minister and his Department. The format of this paper is in that suggested by the Department as part of this specific consultation process and therefore, is not conducive to addressing all of the issues outlined above; however, I fully intend to make use of every opportunity to impress on the incoming Government the need to address the serious issues that affect our education system.

I hope that this submission and the proposals therein will receive due consideration by the Department and steps can be taken to provide the resources and implement the initiatives that our education system requires.

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Carol Nolan TD

Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Education and Skills

1. Prioritising Early Years

Sinn Féin broadly welcomes the commitments in the Programme for Government in terms of the intention to introduce a second pre-school year and the proposed reduction of pupil- teacher ratios for junior and senior infants. In respect of the introduction of the second pre-school year, Sinn Féin would welcome clarity as to when this measure is to be introduced and we would also call for consultation with stakeholders in relation to the proposal. Consideration must also be given to the wishes of parents, who may have prepared their child to start school at four and clarity must be given as soon as possible as to the options available in this regard, in order to facilitate adequate planning. We would also welcome clarity in relation to the timeframe for the reduction of pupil teacher ratio for infant classes – how much will the class size be reduced and by when?

Sinn Féin recognises the importance of early childhood education and early intervention in establishing the foundation upon which children succeed in educational settings. It has been proven in successive studies that effective intervention in early year settings has a significant impact on a child's educational attainment. In this respect, we would ask the Minister to consider the extension of the Early Start pre-school project, targeted at designated areas of urban disadvantage, so that the project may operate on a similar time basis as the ECCE scheme. We also call on the Government to develop and support similar schemes for rural communities that experience significant disadvantage.

Sinn Féin is critical of the delay in rolling out the Aistear and Síosla programmes and we call on the Minister to facilitate their immediate roll out without further delay.

There is the need to develop and support an appropriate framework of qualifications for workers in the early education sector. The EU recommends that 60% of all supervisors, managers and those in leadership positions within the sector should hold degrees. The Government should work towards this objective during its term in office. Workers in the sector are contractually incentivised to hold higher level qualifications than the current minimum FETAC level 5 and adequate supports should be available to allow those working in the sector to progress to a higher qualification level. Targets should be set to ensure that a significant proportion of workers in early education hold level 6, 7 and 8 qualifications so that young children receive early education at the most professional level possible. Sinn Féin proposes the extension of the Learner Fund and we had provided a fund of €80 million over a five year period in our manifesto. We also call for the implementation of rights and standards for workers in ECCE settings and the introduction of contracts with professional salaries that provide for CPD, planning and preparation.

The provision of the ECCE scheme to children with a disability must be a priority in ensuring that we have a truly inclusive early year's education system. In this regard, Sinn Féin welcomes the establishment of a national programme to deliver a level 6 special purpose qualification for 3,600 staff members in 80% of ECCE services to

perform the role of a designated inclusion co-ordinator within their setting. The Government must ensure that adequate funding is available in terms of SNA provision and capitation to ensure that young children with a disability are able to avail of early education in a mainstream setting where appropriate. Sinn Féin had committed to the provision of an additional 1,000 SNAs to the ECCE programme with additional needs training for all workers in the sector who are working with children with special educational needs.

2. Tackling Disadvantage

Sinn Féin welcomes the plans of the incoming Government to support educational inclusion and advance school retention rates. We would express concern at the lack of definitive timeframes and the Government's intention to propose the publication of additional plans and strategies in place of specific proposals to address the disadvantage experienced by groups within the education system at all levels.

Over the last two terms of Government, there have been significant cutbacks in the levels of support available to disadvantaged pupils and students while the cost of education has significantly increased, putting a huge burden on families with lower and middle incomes.

Sinn Féin proposes the an increase of funding to the school meals programme by 40% and the School Books Grant by 30% to provide supports to struggling families, with the aim of further extending this to ensure that every child can avail of a book rental scheme and free school meals. We also propose an initial increase in the Back to School Clothing and Footwear allowance by €50 and an increased rate of payment of the Back to Education Allowance for under 26s to €188.

We propose establishing rules on a statutory footing that require schools to provide the option of a generic school uniform to dramatically reduce the back to school costs on parents and we call on the Government to immediately regulate the practice of "voluntary contributions" in the short time while working to eliminate them in the long term. Voluntary contributions have increased significantly in recent years as a means of limiting the impact of reduced capitation rates in schools and present an immediate barrier to children of lower and middle income families.

We welcome the commitment made in the Programme for Government in relation to the increased capitation rates for primary and post-primary schools and we call on the Government to immediately announce the details of this proposal so that schools can plan for the coming years.

The cuts to guidance counsellors in recent years have had a significant impact particularly in schools from disadvantaged communities. A recent ESRI Leaving School in Ireland report has shown that the removal of guidance counsellors disproportionately affects the prospects of disadvantaged students and 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. Sinn Féin proposes that the Government fully reverse the cuts to

guidance counsellors and ensures at least one guidance counsellor per 500 pupils ex-quota.

We call on the Government to publish the findings of the review of the DEIS scheme in a timely manner to allow for comprehensive consideration of the outcomes of the review and the development of new initiatives to further strengthen the programme and deliver better outcomes for students in disadvantaged areas.

In terms of access to third level education, Sinn Féin notes with concern that the outgoing Government failed to reach targets set down for the participation of those from lower socio-economic groups, students with a disability and mature students. The current participation rates of the lowest socio-economic groups stands at 26% compared to over 50% average nationally. We welcome the publication of the National Action Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education and call on the current Government to prioritise the implementation of this plan. We further propose that resources be allocated to address the inequality of access that exists at present and financial resources be allocated to achieve the goals set out in the plan. Sinn Féin proposes the reversal of changes to the adjacent rate of the student grant to allow a greater number of low and middle income families avail of this support as well as the re-introduction of grant support to postgraduate students. We call on the Government to carry out a comprehensive examination of the reasons why target groups currently fail to access third level education with a view to formalising robust policies to overcome the barriers that exist at present. We propose an examination of the operation of the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme to ensure that these schemes are fit for purpose, adequately resourced and effective.

3. Diversity and Choice for Parents

Sinn Féin recognises that education is a right and should be available to all children on an equal basis, irrespective of background. We also recognise the right of parents to ultimately choose the best educational path for their child.

There is growing demand among parents and communities for access to an educational system, which reflects the values of a modern society. Unfortunately for many parents, the options for their children are limited. Parents wishing to send their child to a gaelscoil or to a non-denominational school may simply not have that option and worse, for some children of minority faiths or with special educational needs, access to their local school is by no means equal. Current legislative provision, ironically named the equal status Act 2000, allows for schools to discriminate against students on the basis of religion or disability. Such discrimination has no place in modern Ireland and we call on the Government to take all steps to eliminate the power of school authorities to refuse access to any student to any school on any of the nine grounds set out in the equal status act as a rule without exception.

Sinn Féin believes that parents, who wish their child to receive their education through the medium of our national language, should be supported and encouraged

in their choice. We note with concern the lack of any commitment to enhance the provision of gael scoileanna in the current Programme for Government to meet the growing demand that exists. While there is a broad consensus that addressing the demographic pressures that exists across all levels of the education sector remains the key priority of the Department of Education and Skills, nevertheless, there is a need to develop a solution to this issue, which is likely to develop into the future as the revival of the language continues. Sinn Féin calls on the incoming Government to carry out a projection of the future demand for gael scoileanna and establish a strategy that ensures that parents wishing to avail of this option may do so.

Sinn Féin notes the review of the school transport scheme and awaits clarification as to the terms of reference of the review. It must involve a wide consultation process with parents and other stakeholders. We note with concern extracts from the Minister's brief which appear to make the case for the downsizing of school buses in order to reduce the number of children travelling on concessionary tickets. We would welcome clarification from the Minister as soon as possible as to the intention of the review and the proposals of downsizing buses. The current rules in relation to school transport undermine the incoming Government's stated intentions to enhance diversity and choice for parents insofar as children are eligible for transport to their nearest school only. These rules ignore the fact that siblings or neighbours of the child may be attending another school, that the nearest school may be oversubscribed or fact that the traditional catchment area of the school may extend beyond the scope of the current rules. Sinn Féin calls for a balanced, economical and flexible system of school transport to be established, which reflects the realities of communities and the stated objective of ensuring choice and diversity for parents.

4. Promoting Excellence and Innovation in our schools

Sinn Féin fully believes in the passion and commitment of teachers within our education system, which when correctly resourced, provides a strong framework to achieve excellence and innovation. To this end, Sinn Féin calls on the incoming government to prioritise the reversal of the trend of under-investment in our education system so that teachers and students have the resources, motivation and capacity to achieve true excellence and innovation.

Sinn Féin welcomes proposals contained in the Programme for Government to establish more collaborative practices between teachers themselves and also between the schools and industry experts. We believe that such practice has the potential to assist in beneficial educational outcomes for students but we would urge caution in particular on the role of industry experts within the education system. While preparing students for work practice is an objective of education in general, it is not the only objective, and careful consideration is required to ensure that the interest of industry does not have an undue influence on our educational system.

In terms of the implementation of the Digital Strategy, Sinn Féin notes with concern that there are still a small percentage of primary schools that do not have access to broadband and we urge the incoming government to address this issue as a matter of urgency. Furthermore, in many rural areas, households do not have access to

broadband, which will have a growing impact on the ability of students to complete assignments/ homework as the role of technology increases in the classroom. While we recognise that addressing this problem is not necessarily under the remit of the Department of Education, nevertheless, it is an important consideration to bear in mind to ensure the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Education on an equitable basis. Sinn Féin also notes that there is a lack of funding available to ensure that schools can maintain IT equipment effectively and we call on the incoming government to address this through the establishment of an appropriate funding stream. Sinn Féin is also conscious of the potential for inequitable development of IT resources for schools based on the availability of funds for such equipment and the ability of teachers to use same, therefore we recommend the establishment and implementation of targets to ensure that all schools and students have access to an acceptable level of IT resources.

5. Promoting Creative and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students

Sinn Féin recognises that one of the objectives of an effective education system is to prepare students for the world of work and for success within industry. We welcome signals in the Programme for Government that greater collaboration between education providers and industry experts will take place and we believe this has the potential to benefit students. We particularly welcome indications that a National Strategy to develop competence in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths will be developed in consultation with the relevant Oireachtas Committee.

Sinn Féin urges caution in over-emphasising the importance of entrepreneurial capacity in students as this could potentially lead to the development of an unhealthy view of education solely as a means of providing for the needs of the economy and industry. While it is assumed that is not the intention, nevertheless, it is important that a clear balance is struck and the interests of industry do not become a dominant feature in our publicly funded education system.

In particular, Sinn Féin would welcome a stronger emphasis from the incoming government on initiatives that develop students' sense of wellbeing and mental health through targeted initiatives designed to address the particular challenges that young people face. For example, Sinn Féin proposes the establishment of particular initiatives to address issues of cyber-bullying, age-appropriate sexual education (to include issues such as contraception, sexual violence, consent), mental health awareness and support, and measures to promote healthy eating and tackle childhood obesity. We note in particular that statistics from the European Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative show more than 20% of our children remain overweight or obese but that rates have either decreased or stabilised in some age groups. However, the report found that the observed reduction or levelling off is not happening in DEIS or disadvantaged schools and we call on the incoming government to enact measures to address this.

Sinn Féin also calls for an audit of PE facilities for all secondary schools to be carried out prior to the introduction of PE as a full subject on the leaving certificate cycle as

evidence suggests that there are a significant proportion of schools that do not have access to such facilities.

6. Making Better Use of Educational Assets within Communities

Sinn Féin supports initiatives to make better use of educational assets within communities especially for the provision of suitable services for young people such as youth clubs, book clubs, sports training, and music or fitness classes. We also recognise that schools can provide an educational facility to adult learners or even a social point for community get togethers such as coffee mornings etc. which may help rural dwellers in particular. The full use of educational assets within communities has the potential to enhance and bring a community together and may, in some cases, be even more beneficial to disadvantaged or rural communities where alternative facilities may not be readily available.

While Sinn Féin of course supports the Department in providing funding as an incentive to such development of community resources, careful consideration must be given to the proposal to link Capitation Funding to the provision of services to communities. Disadvantaged schools, which may not have as wide range of facilities or the means of developing such facilities, must not lose out to schools which have the means of developing enhanced facilities, which may be more readily sought after by the local community. In this respect, full consideration must be given to the workings of such a scheme, to ensure that it operates on a fair and equitable basis, while serving the purpose for which it was intended.

7. Special Needs Education

We welcome the commitment of the incoming Government to establish an in-house model of speech and language therapy. Such a model, if adequately resourced and well implemented, has the potential to deliver an enhanced service for children who require speech and language therapy.

Sinn Féin notes with concern the failure to give a clear commitment to give effect to the EPSEN Act 2004, 12 years after its enactment. There are a certain number of provisions of the EPSEN Act that Sinn Féin feels should be implemented on a statutory basis without further delay – these include the assessment of need within a certain timeframe as required under the Disability Act 2005, the provision of an Individual Education Plan for children with special educational needs that focuses on the educational outcomes to be achieved for the child (as opposed to a personal pupil plan which focuses on the care needs of the child, with a view to reducing these needs as the child becomes more independent) and a statutory appeals mechanism for parents. We note with concern the fact that a recent costing of the implementation of this Act has not been undertaken and appears as if there are no plans to undertake same in the near future, indicating no intention to implement this act on a statutory basis.

We welcome the review of the Reasonable Accommodation Scheme for Certificate Examinations in light of recent high court actions on the issue. We particularly call for the scheme to become more accessible to Leaving Cert students, recognising that those who received the support for the junior certificate examination will be at a disadvantage during the leaving certificate process as the first time they have faced a state examination without the support.

Sinn Féin also calls for the restoration of resource teaching hours to the 100% of hours recommended by the Special Education Review Committee and we criticise the incoming Government that has not made this commitment in the Programme for Government. We call for the immediate reversal of this cut. Sinn Féin welcomes proposals to establish an allocation model of resource teaching on the basis of need and will support efforts to achieve an effective model, which delivers for children with special educational needs on a fair and equitable basis. We await the report on the review of the pilot scheme before formulating a more comprehensive analysis of the scheme and its operation.

Sinn Féin also believes that, with the policy of ensuring that children with special educational needs are taught in mainstream schools in so far as is possible, there is a need for comprehensive training for every teacher in the area of special education. We call for CPD in the area of special educational needs to be made available to every teacher with a particular focus on teachers who may not have received this training initially as part of their degree programme. We welcome the proposal of the establishment of a national Inclusion Support Service for schools to provide a coherent service to schools in relation to special needs education and we call on the incoming Government to progress this without further delay. We also call on the incoming Government to ensure that comprehensive training is provided to SNAs who are required to administer medications or other treatment to children.

8. Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future

Sinn Féin recognises the need to provide school leavers with a range of options to develop their skills, particularly for those who do not wish to avail of formal third level education. In this regard, we welcome the establishment of further apprenticeships and the ambitious target to have 50,000 registrations on apprenticeships and traineeships between 2016 and 2020. In order to effectively meet this target, it is imperative that an apprenticeship is considered to be an attractive option for school leavers, therefore consideration needs to be given to the development of appropriate liaison between providers and schools so that those with an aptitude for a specific trade or profession may be guided towards the correct opportunity to develop these skills further. In a medium/ long term it may be worth considering the development of a formal route to apprenticeship similar to that in Germany for instance, whereby a vocational stream of secondary education works to develop those who wish to pursue apprenticeships, which is a very popular option in Germany.

Notwithstanding the above, there is a clear need to ensure that the level of graduate output remains at a level consistent with the forecasted demand. For example, it is

estimated that there will be insufficient graduates available in the next three to five years and there is a clear demand for graduates in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), ICT and foreign languages. There must be greater communication between course providers and employers to ensure that graduates are equipped with the necessary skills combinations to meet future demand – the teams set up under the regional jobs plan may be an effective way to ensure greater collaboration.

There is also a clear need to promote STEM subjects to female students, as early as late primary school level, in order to address the gender imbalance that exists within these courses and the incoming Government should immediately explore the most effective means of ensuring greater numbers of women pursue training and courses in STEM subjects.

Evaluation of Springboard and ICT conversion courses show the effectiveness of this type of training in that the majority of participants on these courses have achieved employment within a relatively short time of completing the course. The incoming Government should look at the feasibility of extending such schemes and perhaps developing similar intensive conversion courses to address specific skill demands in areas such as foreign language for example.

List of Recommendations

1. Prioritising Early Years

- Consultation with Stakeholders in relation to proposals to raise the school starting age to 5
- A clear timeframe to be set out as to when the pupil-teacher ratio for infant classes will be reduced and by how many points
- Consideration to be given to the extension of the Early Start pre-school project as an intervention scheme for designated areas of urban disadvantage and consideration to be given to extending similar schemes to rural areas
- The immediate roll out of the Aistear and Síolta programmes without further delay
- Targets should be set to ensure that workers in Early Education obtain professional qualifications and recognition given to workers in the sector in terms of pay, CPD similar to other professions
- SNA provision must be made available to children with disabilities to allow them to participate on ECCE scheme

2. Tackling Disadvantage

- Increase in Funding to the School Meals Programme by 40% and the School Books Grant by 30% with the aim of further extending this to ensure every child can avail of a book rental scheme and free school meals
- Increase in the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance by €50
- Increased rate of payment of the Back to Education Allowance for those under 26 to €188
- Legislation to provide the option of generic school uniform
- Immediate regulation of voluntary contributions with a view to eliminating the practice entirely
- Immediately announce details of increased capitation rates for primary and post-primary schools to allow forward planning
- Fully reverse cuts to guidance counsellors and ensure at least one guidance counsellor per 500 pupils ex quota at secondary level
- Timely publication of the DEIS scheme review to allow a comprehensive consideration of its finding and the development of new initiatives to further strengthen the programme
- Prioritisation of the implementation of the National Action Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education with adequate resources provided to address the inequalities that exist at present
- Reversal of changes to the adjacent rate of the student grant and the reintroduction of grant support to postgraduate students

- Comprehensive examination as to the reasons why target groups currently fail to access third level education and the formulation of robust policies to overcome existing barriers
- Examination of the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme to ensure they are fit for purpose, adequately resourced and effective

3. Diversity and Choice for Parents

- Call on the Government to take all steps to eliminate the power of school authorities to refuse access to any student to any school on any of the nine grounds set out in the equal status acts as a rule without exception
- Carry out a projection of future demand for gaelscoil provision and establish a strategy that ensures parents wishing to avail of this may do so
- Establish a wide consultation process with parents and other stakeholders in relation to provision of school transport
- Clarification must be provided in relation to proposals to downsize buses and the potential impact on concessionary school transport holders
- Balanced, economical and flexible system of school transport to be established which reflects the realities of communities and the stated objective of ensuring choice and diversity for parents

4. Promoting Excellence and Innovation in our Schools

- The reversal of the trend of under-investment in education system so that teachers and students have the resources, motivation and capacity to achieve true excellence and innovation
- Establishment of more collaborative practices between teachers themselves and between schools and industry experts has potential to assist in beneficial outcomes for children but caution must be applied in relation to the role of industry experts within education system. Interests of industry must not be allowed to have an undue influence on our educational system
- Government must ensure that all primary schools have access to broadband as a matter of urgency
- Establishment of appropriate funding stream to ensure that adequate funding available to ensure IT equipment can be maintained effectively
- Establishment and implementation of targets to ensure that all schools and students have access to an acceptable level of IT resources to ensure equitable implementation of digital strategy

5. Promoting Creative and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students

- Welcome indications that a National Strategy to develop competence in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths will be developed

- Need for a clear balance between the interests of industry and the broader objective of providing a holistic education to students so that an unhealthy view of education as a means of providing for the needs of industry and economy is not developed and the needs of industry do not become a dominant feature of our publicly funded education system
- Sinn Féin urges Government to emphasis initiatives that will develop and promote students' sense of wellbeing and equip students with skills to address particular challenges in their young lives such as such as initiatives to address cyber bullying, mental health awareness and support and age appropriate sexual education.
- We also urge the government to address the high levels of obesity and overweight children, particularly in disadvantaged schools where evidence shows that rates remain high.
- Audit of PE facilities to be carried out prior to the introduction of PE as a full subject on the leaving certificate.

6. Making Better Use of Educational Assets within Communities

- Welcome for proposals to increase the use of educational assets within communities, particularly disadvantaged or rural communities where such resources may not be readily available
- Careful consideration must be given to proposals to link capitation funding to schools on the basis of provision of services to communities – this may indirectly cause further disadvantage to schools who do not have as well developed facilities or where sufficient demand does not exist
- Government must ensure that such a scheme operates on a fair and equitable basis

7. Special Needs Education

- Implementation of particular aspects of the EPSEN Act should be progressed without delay such as the assessment of need within a certain timeframe as required under the Disability Act 2005, the provision of an Individual Educational Plan for children with special educational needs and a statutory appeals mechanism for parents.
- Reasonable Accommodation Scheme for Certificate Examinations needs to be made more accessible to leaving certificate students, particularly those who have benefitted under the scheme for the junior certificate
- Restoration of resource teaching hours to the 100% of hours as recommended by the Special Education Review Committee
- Development of comprehensive training for every teacher in the area of special educational needs with CPD in this area to be made available to every teacher
- Government should prioritise the establishment of a national inclusion support service for schools to provide a coherent service to schools in the area of special education needs

- Comprehensive training needs to be provided to SNAs who are required to administer medications or other treatments to children.

8. Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future

- Appropriate liaison needs to be established between apprenticeship providers and schools in order to provide information and guidance to students on the apprenticeship options available to them on leaving school
- Consideration should be given in the medium to long term to the development of an appropriate formal route to apprenticeship through a vocational stream of secondary education such as that developed in countries such as Germany
- Greater collaboration between employers and course providers to ensure that graduates are equipped with the necessary skills combinations to fulfil future demand
- Promotion of STEM subjects, particularly to female students, must be a priority of the incoming government
- Consideration must be given to the extension of Springboard and ICT conversion courses, which evidence suggest are attractive to employers and the provision of similar conversion courses where suitable in areas of demand such as foreign languages.