



## **Pre-Budget Submission 2011**

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## **1. OVERALL EDUCATION SPEND**

The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) calls on the present Government to instil confidence and hope in our young people by protecting the Education budget. Such an act would send a clear message both internally and externally that Ireland continues to regard education as an investment in the future prosperity and progress of our nation.

The publication of the OECD report, *Education at a Glance 2011* in early September confirms that Ireland's education sector is grossly under-resourced, even during the height of the economic boom. The subsequent introduction of 32 individual education cuts, most of which are still in place, ensures that we can no longer provide for a sustained school building programme, protect the most vulnerable children in our schools, resource schools adequately and has forced 90% of our schools to engage in some form of fundraising to cover the costs of essentials.

## **2. SCHOOL RUNNING COSTS - CAPITATION GRANTS**

Having regard for schools' worsening financial situation, IPPN recommends that the current rate of capitation be maintained.

IPPN also recommends that a new structure for funding schools be introduced through the inclusion of all other grant payments in the capitation grant. This would avoid fragmented funding of schools and give individual Boards financial flexibility to enable them set their own priorities on spending.

Furthermore, IPPN considers that, in fairness to schools, the combined grant be paid quarterly. This is to avoid boards of management paying overdraft interest.

## **3. SCHOOL BUILDINGS – OUTSOURCED TO PRIVATE SECTOR**

The under-spend of the capital budget for the school building programme in recent years suggests that a radical overhaul of the entire process is warranted. IPPN suggests that a new approach is required, whereby the administration of school building process in Tullamore is removed and outsourced to the private sector. In this model, the DES would tender for and appoint suitable firms providing architectural, engineering and quantity surveying services – and engage private sector firms to assess all current applications and prioritise according to category / nature of need; professionally manage each project and deliver total transparency which should eliminate political lobbying.

#### **4. LEADERSHIP SUPPORTS IN SCHOOLS**

- The Government must reaffirm its commitment to school leadership through the restoration of adequate professional development supports for school leaders. These supports are now an imperative in light of the key role to be played by school leaders in ensuring that the National Strategy, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, restores Ireland's standing in international comparisons of literacy and numeracy attainments. The most appropriate vehicle to deliver effective CPD is through IPPN. Where this has happened in the past, it has proven to be more cost effective and carries the credibility of principals.
- There is also an urgent need for a redefining of the contract of the Principal Teacher with a balance between autonomy and accountability. Principals should have greater autonomy in delegating management responsibilities within their own schools such as prioritising smaller numbers in Junior classes or having the option of taking a Learning Support role if they are a Teaching Principal. In return for this autonomy, Principals will be enabled to improve learning outcomes for all the children in their schools.
- New Boards of Management should have access to appropriate training in the first year of their term of office, particularly in the area of Child Protection.

#### **5. SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

**Special Needs Assistants** – As a country, we are obliged to protect the most vulnerable in our society. There is a very real danger that all the gains made since 1998 in Special Education will be lost if the Government continues to withdraw funding from children with special needs in the upcoming budget. Special Needs Assistants in particular, present as an easy target. These positions are created on a needs basis supported by a clinical diagnosis and any further suppression of these positions will render meaningless all the excellent work done by successive visionary officials in the DES over the last 15 years. IPPN recommends that any child with a professional recommendation for SNA support receives that support. We also recommend that the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act which was enacted in 2004 be fully commenced in accordance with the envisaged timeframe.

##### **Other SEN Supports**

The integration of children with special educational needs and children from overseas into mainstream classes, in addition to addressing the needs of Traveller children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds, has worked extremely well over the last decade. The two main factors for this success were the level of support and commitment by the DES to resourcing the actual needs of these children and the goodwill of school communities to the integration model. However, we are now witnessing the withdrawal of these key supports which acted as an essential 'scaffold' for mainstream classes and their teachers. Already we can see the detrimental effect of cuts to SEN supports. If there is any further dismantling of this scaffolding, it will lead to unthinkable outcomes.

## **6. PRIMARY PUPIL DATA BASE**

IPPN has been calling for the establishment of a Primary Pupil Data Base as a matter of urgency since 2002. This facility could track children from infant entry until transition to second level and beyond. It would enable efficient allocation of resources, eliminate duplication and streamline antiquated practices within the Department of Education and Skills and within schools also. Such a system has been in place for years in the Department of Agriculture and Food to track the movement of livestock and a similar model is urgently required in the education sector.

## **7. EXEMPTION FROM VAT**

According to the Department of the Environment, a primary school is a business therefore it must pay water charges. Yet, when the same school wishes to claim back VAT, like a business, they are told they cannot do so as they are not a business! IPPN is repeating its request to the government to address this inter-departmental anomaly and give an exemption to primary schools from VAT. This would go a small way to acknowledging that already between 30% and 50% of operational costs are funded by voluntary contributions and fundraising, greatly alleviating the Exchequer burden.

## **8. PRINCIPAL ADMINISTRATIVE RELEASE DAYS**

Teaching Principals currently can avail of a number of release days to fulfil administrative duties. Regrettably due to the unavailability of suitable substitute teachers, many teaching principals are unable to avail of their admin days. Over 70% of all Principals are engaged in a class teaching role. In order to adequately fulfil the dual role of teaching and non-teaching duties, there is an urgent need to provide planned substitute cover whereby a fully qualified teacher is allocated to a cluster of small schools, thus enabling the Teaching Principal to be released from the classroom for an extended period of time to engage in administrative functions.

Alternatively, the provision of an Administrative Principal to a cluster of small schools with a combined enrolment of at least 178 children should be trialled on a pilot basis. A rotating Administrative Principal would give smaller schools some of the benefits enjoyed by larger schools without having to amalgamate. IPPN has already completed some preliminary work on this issue and is satisfied as to its viability. Cf *New Horizons for Smaller Schools and Teaching Principals in Ireland (IPPN 2006)*.

## **9. PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES TO SCHOOLS**

IPPN calls on the Government to deliver on its commitment to expand the Psychological Service to schools in the forthcoming Budget. Currently, up to 30% of children requiring assessment fall outside the scope of NEPS.

## **10. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

The recent funding for ICT in the classroom is most welcome but falls far short of the €1,460 per pupil required by 2012 for the integration of ICT into the curriculum. In addition, schools must be given autonomy to spend ICT monies according to the needs of each individual school. Rather than prescribe how schools should spend the recently allocated grants, the Government must first ensure that all schools have access to high speed broadband and provide funding in the coming budget to ensure this becomes a reality. There are still significant pockets around the country where principals and teachers are depending on their homes to access the internet as their school broadband connections are so unreliable.

There is still no clear strategy for the introduction of ICT as a tool for teaching and learning for every child in Ireland. Unless we put a strategy in place which deals with hardware, software, connectivity, technical support and, most importantly, enhancement of the curriculum, in ten years time we will be even further behind the education systems to which we aspire.

## **11. CLASS SIZE**

Increasing the average class size by one pupil does not mean placing one additional pupil into each classroom. What it means is hundreds of schools losing a classroom teacher because they would need a larger number of pupils to retain current staffing levels. Teachers are the single greatest resource in the school. Losing a teacher has a devastating effect on the whole organisation of classes (e.g. 8 class levels previously taught by 4 teachers, now taught by 3 teachers), ultimately leading to a poorer quality of teaching and learning.

## **12. CONCLUSION**

Ireland's reputation for education is in decline. In spite of this, there is universal agreement that the strongest asset we have is the quality of our teaching force, which is evident by the level of competition annually for places in teacher training colleges. This is something we can be very proud of. However, if we continuously shrink the budget for education, not only on an international comparison, but also relative to other government departments, we will reap what we sow and witness a rapid decline in our children's standard of education.