

IPPN/INTO/ CPSMA/CIBE/GAELOIDEACHAS

**Joint Proposal on the Expansion of  
the Small Schools' Project**

**May 2026**

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## 1. Context

Small primary schools are a cornerstone of the Irish education landscape, playing a vital role in sustaining local communities and providing continuity in education across generations. In September 2024, then Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, stated that

*'Small schools are a support and a beacon for local communities. They are at the heart of educating generations of young people and providing a focal point for families and communities.'*

The closure of other local amenities — such as post offices, Garda stations, shops, and churches — further amplifies the central role of the school in community life. Rural isolation, population decline, difficulties in recruiting teachers, and challenges in attracting Board of Management (BoM) members all serve to undermine the sustainability of small schools and compound the complexity of leadership in these contexts.

The importance of school leadership as an influence on and key determinant of pupil learning has been clearly established. However, IPPN's research has highlighted the extent to which primary school leadership is compromised: the workload of school leaders continues to expand, with a disproportionate focus on administrative and bureaucratic tasks. 97% of school leaders report that the volume of non-educational administrative tasks they must undertake undermines both the effectiveness and sustainability of their roles. This particular dynamic was detailed in UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report on leadership in education at all levels. The report concluded that primary school leaders are consistently diverted from focusing on teaching and learning because of the extent of their non-educational administrative workload. It further concludes that school leaders have insufficient time to focus on instructional leadership, which is compromising the quality of teaching and learning.

The issue of time for leadership is particularly acute in small schools where the principal is either a mainstream class teacher or a Special Education teacher, with only one day a week allocated for their leadership and management responsibilities. In order to ascertain the extent to which the sustainability of school leadership roles is compromised by this expanded workload

and disproportionate focus on management tasks, IPPN asked school leaders to rate the sustainability of their leadership role (0 being completely unsustainable and 10 being fully sustainable). While the low sustainability ratings across all leadership roles should be of concern to policy makers, education stakeholders and practitioners, of particular concern must be the sustainability rating of 2.88 reported by teaching principals.

In its manifesto for the 2024 general election, *2030 Vision: Essential Investments for Advancing Primary and Special Education*, the INTO called for the government to ‘support small schools through tailored funding and resource allocation for clustering, based on the outcomes of the Small Schools’ Project’. The Programme for Government subsequently outlined that ‘the government will introduce a new national Small Schools Project for all 1,300 small primary schools to protect these school communities and develop new administrative supports.’

Recognising the need for action to support small schools and their leadership, in May 2025, then Minister for Education, Helen McEntee, stated:

*‘The Programme for Government provides for a number of measures to support small schools, including introducing a new national small schools’ project and trialling new administrative supports. Learnings from the evaluation of the current project will be invaluable and form a strong basis to inform the future policy direction in relation to all small schools.’*

This joint proposal from IPPN, INTO, CPSMA, CIBE and Gaeloideachas offers a nationally scalable framework of support for small schools that would enable the achievement of the objectives contained in the Programme for Government.

## 2. Small Schools Cluster Action Research Project

The Small Schools Cluster Action Research Project was initiated in 2022, aimed at supporting small rural schools to cluster together in local groups, enabling them to identify shared challenges and work together on solutions.

Six clusters of small schools were formed in the geographical regions of Galway, Donegal, Kerry, Clare, Wicklow, and Waterford. Each cluster has between three and five schools and is supported by a part-time local coordinator, sponsored by IPPN, INTO, CPSMA, CIBE and Gaeloideachas. The local coordinator works under a national coordinator who reports to a steering group made up of the five organisations and the DEY.

Each cluster organically identified areas of development that were most pertinent to them. They identified targeted actions to progress collaboratively. The aim has been to try out ideas, to test their viability and to examine their impact on the sustainability of the role of the school leader, on the fostering of innovation in teaching and learning as well as on the sustainability of the school.

The schools and their leaders are receiving support in areas such as:

- recruitment of substitute teachers and SNAs
- centralised vetting of all substitute SNAs for all the schools in the cluster
- organisation of staff CPD, parent talks, shared sports days, shared flag initiatives across the cluster
- supporting the management of the Exceptional Review Process across the cluster
- policy development across the cluster, including areas such as health and safety & First Aid
- co-ordination of the free book scheme across the cluster
- audit and management of shared resources
- development of a common approach to SSE
- procurement of IT equipment, cleaning supplies, photocopier contracts etc.
- Droichead training
- clustered leadership coaching.

In terms of trialling ways to ensure that school leaders can focus to a greater extent on their core purpose of leading teaching and learning, the appointment of Cluster Administrative Officers in the Gort and Donegal clusters has been a significant development.

At its annual Congress, the INTO passed a resolution calling for the appointment of co-ordinators to each of the clusters established in a new National Small Schools' Project, together with full-time Administrative Officers for each cluster.

The next stage is crucial – to build on the learning in the clusters and ensure that the initiatives that have been proven to work are implemented nationally, to benefit all small schools.

### 3. Findings and Recommendations of the Review of the Pilot Project 2021-2024

The *Review of the Small Schools Project 2021-2024* was published in September 2024. A synopsis of its findings include the following:

1. The Project recognises the central educational and community role of small rural schools in Ireland and aims to support their leadership, sustainability, and teaching and learning through clustering arrangements.
2. The importance of the national coordinator and the strong emphasis on school-led, 'bottom-up' innovation and collaboration are highlighted.
3. The targeted training for principals, deputy principals, teachers, and secretaries (including coaching, middle-management training, IT and wellbeing) has reduced isolation, built trust, and directly supported more sustainable leadership practice.
4. Low-cost administrative supports have had high impact, especially merging principal release days with SET hours, modest yard-supervision funding, shared planning (including DEIS plans), and use of common administration software and shared drives.
5. A diverse range of cluster-based teaching and learning initiatives (e.g. shared tablets, STEM/LEGO, sustainable energy projects, music, chess, wellbeing and

transition programmes) have been trialled which have significantly enhanced pupil learning, interaction, and confidence at a generally modest cost.

6. Positive pupil perspectives are emphasised: strong sense of local identity, enjoyment of cluster activities, and evidence that clustering helps socialisation and transition to post-primary school.
7. The Cluster Administration Officer (CAO) is the single most significant administrative innovation, substantially easing principals' workload and is widely recommended for scaled rollout despite clear cost implications.
8. Unresolved governance questions are noted (e.g. shared governance, 'super-principal' models) and careful small-scale trials, learning from international models (Netherlands, Northern Ireland) and stronger engagement with boards and parents are recommended.

The September 2024 Review noted that the prime foci of the 2021-2024 phase have been on supporting, training, administration and organization at school level, fostering innovation in teaching and learning and basically making the day-to-day running of small schools more sustainable. In all of these areas the project has been very successful and many of its successes will be scalable for the future (*The Small Schools Project 2021-2024, p.5*).

The Review also concludes that the project has been very successful overall in reducing administrative burden, strengthening collaboration and innovation, and generating scalable, often low-cost practices, while calling for renewed impetus, continued steering oversight beyond 2026, and a stronger focus on governance and wider community engagement in the next phase.

## 4. Alignment with Programme for Government

The Programme for Government commits to 'introduce a new national Small Schools Project for all 1,300 small primary schools to protect these school communities and develop new administrative supports.'

The government's programme also commits to:

- supporting rural and small schools
- strengthening school leadership

- promoting collaboration
- addressing educational disadvantage
- enhancing wellbeing supports.

The Small Schools’ Cluster project proposal enables the achievement of these commitments by:

- protecting the sustainability of small schools
- investing in leadership capacity
- creating structured collaboration
- reducing leadership overload
- improving systems that support pupil outcomes.

## 5. Overview of Proposed Proposal

**Proposed initiative to begin implementation of the commitment made in the Programme for Government:**

<b>Title:</b>	Small Schools Cluster Initiative
<b>Target Group:</b>	650 Small primary schools*
<b>Duration:</b>	Initial two-year phased approach
<b>Commencement:</b>	Academic Year 2027–2028, with current pilot continuing for 2026/27 school year

*\* A small school is defined by the DEY as a school that has four mainstream classrooms or less.*

## 6. Rationale

Mindful of the context outlined above and building on the experience and findings of the pilot project, IPPN, INTO, CPSMA, CIBE and Gaeloideachas set out a proposal to ensure that the next stage benefits half of Ireland's small schools initially, with full implementation from 2030.

This proposal details a nationally scalable framework that supports the sustainability of small schools, enhances collaborative practice across small primary schools in Ireland, improves administrative efficiency, and supports school leadership in small schools. It aligns with

- the domains and standards of the quality framework for schools as detailed in LAOS 2022
- the recommendations contained in IPPN's Sustainable Leadership report - [Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action – A Roadmap to Sustainability.](#)
- the recommendations contained in INTO's research on Teacher and Principal Workload, [Teacher Workload, INTO Research Report](#)

This Small Schools Cluster Project proposal directly advances these national priorities by developing leadership capacity, enhancing pupil experience and outcomes and better ensuring the viability and sustainability of small schools.

## 7. Strategic Aims

The initiative will:

- mitigate professional isolation by establishing structured cluster networks that provide sustained peer support, shared problem-solving and collective professional dialogue for teachers and school leaders in small schools.
- build collaborative professional capacity through formalised inter-school partnerships that strengthen collective efficacy, shared planning, and evidence-informed practice
- enhance school self-evaluation and strategic improvement processes by enabling cluster-level reflection aligned to LAOS domains, supporting more rigorous planning, monitoring and review

- embed and operationalise distributed leadership, consistent with LAOS 2022 (Leadership and Management – Developing Leadership Capacity), by creating structured leadership roles and shared responsibilities within and across clusters
- strengthen administrative coherence and compliance systems by introducing shared supports, streamlined procedures and coordinated oversight that reduce duplication and improve organisational effectiveness
- develop deputy principal and middle leadership capacity by providing structured release opportunities, shadowing arrangements and leadership pathways that support succession planning in small schools.

## 8. Alignment with LAOS

The small school cluster project proposal supports particularly Domain 4 (Teachers' Collective / Collaborative Practice) of the Quality Framework for the Learning and Teaching aspect of Looking at our Schools. It enables teachers in these schools to:

- value and engage in professional learning and professional collaboration
- work together to devise learning opportunities for pupils across and beyond the curriculum
- collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable formative and summative assessment practices
- contribute to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise

It also supports all four domains of the quality framework for leadership and management as detailed in LAOS 2022:

### **Domain 1 – Leading Learning and Teaching**

By reducing the time spent on non-educational administration, school leaders can focus on instructional leadership.

### **Domain 2 – Managing the Organisation**

Shared administrative systems improve efficiency and compliance.

### **Domain 3 – Leading School Development**

Cluster collaboration enhances school self-evaluation and strategic planning.

### **Domain 4 – Developing Leadership Capacity**

Deputy principal and assistant principal administrative days and cluster collaboration embed distributed leadership.

## **9. Expected Outcomes**

### **For Children**

- Broader and more consistent learning experiences, enabled through coordinated curriculum planning and shared initiatives across cluster schools.
- Stronger inclusion and wellbeing supports, improved special education coordination and whole-school wellbeing structures.
- Smoother educational transitions, supported by structured inter-school collaboration and preparation for post-primary progression.
- Enhanced opportunities for pupil voice and participation, fostering confidence, engagement and a stronger sense of belonging.

### **For School Staff**

- Streamlined and coherent administrative systems, reducing duplication and improving operational efficiency.
- Improved attendance monitoring and data-informed decision-making processes.
- Stronger compliance and governance structures, supported by coordinated policy management and review cycles.
- A culture of shared innovation and collective problem-solving, drawing on cluster expertise to address common challenges.

## For School Leaders

- Enhanced leadership capacity, with clearer role definition and strengthened strategic oversight across clustered contexts.
- More coherent and forward-looking strategic planning, grounded in shared analysis and aligned improvement priorities.
- Increased capacity to lead learning and teaching, through protected instructional leadership time consistent with LAOS expectations.
- Improved professional wellbeing and long-term sustainability, supported by reduced isolation and more proportionate administrative demands.

## For Deputy Principals and Assistant Principals

- Structured and meaningful leadership development, enabled by ringfenced leadership time and defined project responsibilities.
- Strengthened distributed leadership practice, with shared accountability for agreed cluster priorities.
- A clear succession planning pathway, supporting leadership continuity within and across small schools.
- Increased confidence and professional competence, developed through collaborative leadership experiences and peer networks.

## For Teachers

- Developing professional learning communities with increased opportunities for collaboration both in-school and within the cluster
- Supporting their wellbeing through increased connections within the cluster
- Increased job security through shared posts for SET/ Supply panels
- Improved access to teaching resources on a shared basis
- Increased access to targeted professional development opportunities

## 10. Structure of the Initiative

### 2026–2027 School Year: Current Pilot Scheme Extended

#### Year 1 (2027–2028): Formation and Trust-Building Phase

**Focus:** Relationship-building, collaboration, and shared vision.

Importantly, Year 1 is developmental — not compliance-driven. Trust and relational capacity are foundational before operational sharing begins.

#### **Cluster Formation**

- DEY invites applications from clusters of 4-6 small schools who wish to participate in the expanded scheme.
- 4–6 geographically proximate small schools form a cluster.
- Formal agreement of participation is signed by Boards of Management.

#### **Provision in Year 1**

- Each school receives 9 Cluster Days, ringfenced for collaborative work.
- Structured external facilitation is provided by Oide, ensuring focused, purposeful engagement.
- A blended model is offered combining professional learning, strategic dialogue, system mapping and action planning.
- Time is explicitly protected to enable deep engagement rather than surface coordination.

### Shared Administrative Support (Readiness-Based Implementation)

**Focus:** Reducing administrative burden to ensure an increased focus on instructional leadership.

#### **Provision**

A shared administrator is made available to the schools in each cluster. The Cluster Administration Officer (CAO) will undertake key administrative duties traditionally performed by teaching principals, excluding secretarial work. This role will provide operational support, promote collaboration and ensure the effective management of

shared resources across a cluster of schools.

## **Key Responsibilities:**

### **1. General Coordination and Collaboration**

- Visit schools regularly to establish term and annual priorities.

### **2. Administrative and Operational Support**

- Policy Development - act as a link person between schools in developing questionnaires, surveys, rubrics (e.g. shared Google drive for cluster), under the guidance of school principals.
- Develop and manage a substitute staff list for teachers and SNAs, ensuring Garda Vetting, compliance and regular updates
- Assist with funding and grant applications (e.g., STEM, School Meals, Summer Works), including preparation, submission, and follow-up
- Liaise with health and safety officers on the Board of Management
- Provide a reminder of deadlines to school management e.g. Online Claims System (OLCS), redeployment panels, Tusla etc.
- Assist with applications for Summer Works/ Emergency Works etc.
- Oversee Summer Works/Emergency Works
- Maintain and update systems like Aladdin and Google Workspace, including:
  - Uploading pupil files
  - Training staff on effective use of these systems

### **3. Resource Management**

- Audit and manage shared resources (e.g., book covering machines, iPads, diagnostic tools) across the cluster
- Coordinate the procurement of ICT tools, licenses, textbooks, and other materials, securing cost-effective deals
- Establish and oversee the use of shared libraries for books, SEN resources, and diagnostic assessments.

#### **4. Professional Development and Training**

- Under the direction of the school principals, organise continuous professional learning (CPD) opportunities for teaching and non-teaching staff covering topics such as First Aid, Droichead, and Health & Safety.
- Provide training on administrative systems for principals, secretaries, and teachers or seek external expertise in this area.

#### **5. Financial Oversight**

- Assist principals and boards with budget monitoring, VAT/RCT compliance, and financial reporting to the FSSU
- Coordinate cluster-wide procurement strategies to maximise cost savings on shared purchases, under the direction of the school principals and boards of management.

#### **6. End-of-Year Review and Future Planning**

- Conduct cluster reviews to assess progress, highlight achievements, and identify areas for improvement in consultation with the principals in the cluster.

#### **7. School Buildings, Health & Safety and Compliance**

- Conduct regular risk assessments related to health and safety, ensuring compliance with legal and safety regulations
- Schedule and coordinate maintenance tasks, liaise with contractors, and ensure timely repairs
- Ensure all schools are prepared for Health and Safety Authority (HSA) inspections by managing necessary documentation and ensuring compliance with safety standards.
- Ensure value contracts for utilities such as electricity and phones on behalf of the schools in the cluster
- Oversee the purchasing and management of cleaning and maintenance

equipment, as well as the organising of cleaning contracts

- Ensure GDPR Compliance
- Ensure maintenance of HR records for all staff according to legal requirements.

## **8. Website Maintenance and IT Support**

- Maintain each school's website, ensuring content is up to date and in compliance with Data Protection regulations
- Provide basic IT troubleshooting and coordinate with external IT providers, when necessary.

## **9. Point of contact with outside agencies**

- Liaise with Department of Education and Youth around minor works, emergency works, summer works projects
- Support with applications for funding, projects and initiatives such as cluster projects or Schools Excellence Funds.

## **Year 1 Objectives**

- Cluster Administrative Officer is identified and resourced by DEY
- Establish high-trust professional relationships across the cluster.
- Develop a shared, practical understanding of LAOS domains,
- Surface and analyse common leadership pressures and sustainability challenges.
- Agree proportionate and context-sensitive cluster governance structures.
- Co-construct a two-year Cluster Strategic Action Plan, aligned to LAOS and Circular 0044/2019, with an emphasis on cluster development, collaboration, distributed leadership and reflective practice.

## **Year 2 (2028–2029): Capacity Building**

**Focus:** Embedding distributed leadership and implementing agreed cluster priorities.

Year 2 shifts from developmental dialogue to disciplined implementation. Leadership is intentionally broadened. Responsibility is shared. Structures become operational. The

focus remains proportionate and sustainable – clusters implement agreed priorities at a context specific pace that maintains quality while protecting staff wellbeing.

### **Provision in Year 2**

In Year 2, opportunities for shared leadership between the principals, deputy principals and middle management post holders across the clusters are established. Time is allocated for the school leadership teams to meet and plan for collaboration / shared learning between the schools in the cluster. This work would be supported by the cluster coordinator. This work would include a shared responsibility for:

- helping to identify common priorities or areas of interest for cluster work
- promoting a supportive professional network among school staffs
- scheduling and coordinating meetings across the cluster to ensure all schools are represented and informed
- ensuring meetings are planned at suitable times to maximise participation from all schools
- circulating agendas, documentation, and relevant materials in advance of meetings
- maintaining a basic record of meeting dates, themes, and agreed actions, where appropriate
- ensuring clear communication with all schools in the cluster
- supporting collaborative discussions on school leadership, teaching and learning, wellbeing, and school improvement
- providing up-to-date information on decisions, initiatives, and priorities
- providing a point of contact with Oide (or other external bodies) on behalf of the cluster
- ensuring that cluster meetings and communications are open, collaborative, and respectful of the workload of teaching principals.

Clusters will identify and advance a limited number of shared priorities. These may include:

- coherent attendance monitoring and intervention systems
- special education coordination and inclusive practice frameworks
- policy harmonisation and streamlined review cycles

- curriculum planning alignment and resource sharing
- compliance monitoring and reporting processes
- school-wide and cluster-wide professional learning experiences designed to streamline instructional delivery while strengthening professional relationships and collaboration among staff
- whole-school and cluster-wide wellbeing structures.

The emphasis is on focused, manageable initiatives with clear ownership and measurable impact.

### **In-School Management Capacity Building**

Each participating school is allocated 9 In-school Management Release Days.

#### **Strategic Purpose**

These days are designed to:

- strengthen distributed leadership in line with LAOS (Leadership and Management – Developing Leadership Capacity)
- build sustainable future leadership pipelines within small schools
- enable school leadership teams to take formal responsibility for agreed cluster initiatives.

Principals / Deputy Principals / Assistant Principals will collaborate across clusters to lead defined projects, creating cross-school professional networks and strengthening collective capacity.

This structured delegation of leadership responsibilities:

- reduces over-reliance on the principal role
- builds succession readiness
- normalises shared accountability for school improvement.

## 11. Projected cost of the Small Schools' Cluster Project Proposal

<b>Year</b>	<b>Element</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Total for School Year</b>
<b>2026-2027 School Year</b>	Continue Existing Pilot Scheme	<b>€150,000</b>	<b>€150,000</b>
<b>2027-2028 School Year</b>	9 In-School Mgmt Release Days for each 650 Schools	<b>€1.7 million</b>	<b>€6.65 million</b>
	130 Cluster Administrative Officers	<b>€4.3 million</b>	
	Clustering Activity Grants	<b>€650,000</b>	
<b>2028-2029 School Year</b>	9 In-School Mgmt Release Days for each 650 Schools	<b>€1.7 million</b>	<b>€6.65 million</b>
	130 Cluster Administrative Officers	<b>€4.3 million</b>	
	Clustering Activity Grants	<b>€650,000</b>	
<b>2029-2030 School Year</b>	9 In-School Mgmt Release Days for each 1,300 Schools	<b>€3.4 million</b>	<b>€13.3 million</b>
	260 Cluster Administrative Officers	<b>€8.6 million</b>	
	Clustering Activity Grants	<b>€1.3 million</b>	

## Conclusion

The Small Schools' Cluster Project proposal represents a deliberate and system-aligned investment in the long-term sustainability of small primary schools across Ireland. It translates national policy into practical, scalable structures that strengthens leadership, governance and educational quality.

The proposal directly supports:

- improved conditions for high-quality learning and teaching
- the delivery of the commitments within the Programme for Government, to introduce a new national Small Schools Project for all 1,300 small primary schools to protect these school communities and develop new administrative supports, with the attendant benefits for rural communities
- the implementation of LAOS, through structured collaborative leadership and improvement planning
- the development and embedding of a culture of distributed leadership, as envisaged in Circular 0044/2019
- greater administrative coherence and efficiency

Small schools play a hugely significant and pivotal role in their communities. When supported through structured collaboration, enhanced leadership capacity and shared administrative systems, they move from isolated entities to resilient, collective networks.

This joint proposal from IPPN, INTO, CPSMA, CIBE and Gaeloideachas is a strategic reinforcement of existing policy, designed to ensure dynamic and sustainable school communities in which leadership is empowered to flourish, and all children are enabled to thrive.