

## 10. Education

### **Ambition for the New Partnership Government and 32<sup>nd</sup> Dáil**

Education is the key to giving every child an equal opportunity in life. No child should be left behind in economic recovery and we should use our strengthening economy to become a leader in the provision of world-class education and skills. Ireland is recognised as having a strong education system, with a well-trained and committed teaching profession. Our rates of school completion and participation in higher education continue to rise. And yet, too many of our children still fall through the cracks, and are in danger of being left behind.

We now have an opportunity to change our approach in some aspects of education. To do this, the Government, working in conjunction with the Oireachtas must introduce measures that will modernise our education system, address the demands and pressures that face school leaders, and equip young people with key enabling skills for the future so they can meet their full potential in a fast-changing world. Every child leaving primary school should be able to read and write.

Investment in education is a prime way to grow our society and economy in tandem. Investing in educating improves human capital, thereby generating wider benefits for our economic and jobs growth and competitiveness, as well as ensuring that all our people have opportunities to achieve their potential.

We are committed to investing an extra €500million in education by 2021 through measures including childcare subventions, HSE Speech and Language Therapists, to bring the number up to 1,102 (a 25% increase) additional National Educational Psychologists (NEPs) to the bring the total to 238 (a 25% increase), reducing the pupil teacher ratio in junior and senior infants, annual increases in primary and secondary capitation rates, additional teacher CPD, a new School Excellence Fund, pay increases in accordance with the Lansdowne Road Agreement and extra third level investment.

We will also reduce primary school class sizes; reintroduce guidance counselling to secondary schools and increase financial supports for post graduate students with a particular focus on those from low income households.

With this investment we will pursue the below principles of access, excellence, transparency and innovation. We will produce a three year strategy for the Department of Education within the first 100 days and a framework for measuring its progress in consultation with stakeholders.

## **1. Prioritising Early Years**

The first five years last a lifetime. The experiences early in life are critical in establishing the foundation for learning, work and future health. We are prioritising early years' investment to reap a host of positive outcomes, including higher secondary school completion, employment rates and higher lifetime earnings. These measures underpin a targeted investment approach based on international best practice for young children.

We will target investment in children's early years by:

- Introducing a second preschool year which will help prepare young children further for starting school, raising the school starting age to 5 years
- Reduce the pupil-teacher ratio for junior and senior infants by providing smaller classes, which have the greatest beneficial impact on younger pupils. The gains from smaller class size in early years are shown to carry forward into future years. Research shows pupils are more likely to stay in school longer and earn better results
- Developing a new model of In-School Speech and Language Therapy, involving collaboration between parents, schools and primary care services
- Providing additional NEPS psychologists to support new intervention strategies for staff and pupils, and offer immediate support to schools in cases of critical incidents

## **2. Tackling Disadvantage**

We will increase mandatory schooling to age 17. We will also publish a new School Completion Strategy to further improve school completion rates, particularly in disadvantaged areas. School retention rates are increasing but more can be done to ensure

a transition to work or further education for young school leavers. Additional supports to groups working with Early School Leavers will be examined.

We will publish a new updated Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, within 12 months, with particular focus on DEIS schools. There are also many students outside of DEIS who could benefit from such support. In reviewing DEIS, consideration should be given to a more broad-based package of measures which encompasses all aspects of education which are impacted by disadvantage (e.g. summer programmes for children, which evidence shows, have considerable educational benefit).

The provision of relevant educational programmes, specifically aimed at early leavers and second chance learners should be made available throughout the year, on a modular basis. We will support an increase in the number of flexible courses available; giving people the opportunity to attend courses part time, during evenings, in the summer and at weekends.

The Defence Forces have a significant contribution to make to individuals and to broader society. We will provide individuals who would otherwise struggle to break out of a cycle of disadvantage an opportunity to discover new skills and longer-term employment capacity. We will introduce a pilot employment support scheme in 2016, providing 30-40 participants with skills and training identifiable with the Defence Forces.

### **3. Diversity and Choice for Parents**

We need a dynamic and innovative education system that reflects the diversity of Twenty First Century Ireland. We will strengthen parental choice and diversity in our school system, reflecting the need in modern Ireland for new forms of multi-denominational and non-denominational education, while also safeguarding the right of parents to send their children to denominational schools that offer a distinct religious ethos, should they so wish. A road map has been agreed for a phased transfer of Catholic schools to new patrons, where the support of communities exists. We will work with all stakeholders to facilitate this process whilst also considering new approaches such as the potential of different patrons on a single site.

We will increase the number of non-denominational and multi-denominational schools with a view to reaching 400 by 2030.

We will publish new School Admissions and Excellence legislation taking account of current draft proposals (publication of school enrolment policies, an end to waiting lists, introduction of annual enrolment structures, and transparency and fairness in admissions for pupils). We will seek to enact this legislation for the start of school year 2017-18.

The role and power of an Ombudsman for Education, to whom a parent could complain and appeal on foot of a decision by a board of management, will be examined by the relevant Oireachtas Committee to ensure its consistency with the need to ensure better local decision making and accountability to parents.

We will ensure that no small school closes against the wishes of parents, while also facilitating those small schools who wish to amalgamate. Within 3 months, we will commence a review of the teacher appointment thresholds in schools with 4 or less teachers.

We will review the concessionary charges and rules element of the School Transport Scheme prior to Budget 2017. We will review the criteria and guidelines for the School Transport Appeals Board.

We will review the options for standardised testing so that clear information is provided to teachers and parents. Parents should be able to receive annual reports on how their school is doing. Government should also be able to assess how new investments are progressing (e.g. reductions in pupil-teacher ratio, speech & language interventions).

We will introduce a stronger complaints procedure and charter for parents, and commence the Fitness to Teach provisions of the Teaching Council Act (10 years after its enactment).

#### **4. Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools**

In promoting excellence and innovation, we will introduce greater flexibility in our schools and pursue measures to achieve this. This may include nurturing different ambitions through new subject choices, greater engagement with enterprise on future skills needs, and increased flexibility in the day to day management of schools in order to improve outcomes. School leadership will be supported in identifying and introducing reforms that drive up educational standards, particularly in the fundamentals of reading, writing and arithmetic.

We will set out capitation rates to schools on a rolling 3-year basis, allowing for forward planning. School management will have the decision making power to allocate these resources as they deem appropriate, including to posts of responsibility.

We will establish a new Schools Excellence Fund, which rewards new approaches driven by teachers and by parents themselves to the benefit of pupils' education. Applications that seek to tackle educational disadvantage will be prioritised.

We will establish a pool of experts (educators, employers, accountants, business leaders, IT specialists etc.) to assist school initiatives, promote innovation and enterprise engagement especially at second level.

As part of the Digital Strategy, we will introduce new technology bringing remote learning into classrooms, ensuring all students have access to a wider range of subject choices and consistent quality education.

We will invest in additional continuous professional development for teachers, to ensure they are supported throughout their careers, and are best placed to respond to the developing challenges that their students face. Newly appointed school principals will take a preparation course in advance of taking up their role.

In order to improve student's outcomes and school performance, we will examine the potential for measures to assist teaching principals. We will also incentivise voluntary school

participation in new “Local Education Clusters” that encourage schools to improve student outcomes by sharing best practice and school improvement experiences, foster collaborative in and out-of-hours initiatives, staff peer mentoring and leadership, and that allow for cost reductions through economies of scale.

## **5. Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students**

The curriculum is evolving. In 2016, we need to focus on the future needs, abilities and capacity of students. Focus must remain on literacy and maths, but new subjects should be introduced such as the arts, entrepreneurial education, and mental health awareness. We will further accelerate the Digital and ICT agenda in schools by including a coding course for the Junior Cycle and introducing ICT/Computer Science as a Leaving Certificate subject. We will also introduce a new Leaving Certificate P.E. syllabus as a full subject. Guidance counselling at secondary level will be enhanced.

We will evaluate transition supports available to young people at all levels of the education, with a view to promoting initiatives which support young people at critical points in their lives.

Transition Year, in particular, will be used to prepare young people with key skills before they make the transition to higher education or work. We will work with industry and colleges to open up new opportunities and programmes in transition year.

The relevant Oireachtas Committee will be requested to review the recommendations contained in the forthcoming STEM report and outline the way forward in implementing a National Strategy to develop competence in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths.

We will benchmark entrepreneurial activity in Irish higher education and work with the Higher Education Authority to ensure an ambitious and implementable plan to identify and address skills gaps, ICT and STEM needs.

## **6. Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities**

We are committed to delivering a school capital investment programme for extensions/refurbishments, additional school places, and eliminating the use of prefabs. Significant funding has been secured as part of the Capital Plan.

We support an annual application process for the Minor Works and Summer Works schemes. In addition we will introduce a new funding mechanism for low cost safety measures for primary schools such as car parks and bus lay-bys.

Schools buildings must be utilised out of hours if they are to remain at the centre of communities into the future, both throughout the day and throughout the year, including better utilisation of information technology. Afterschool care, homework clubs and other community activities should be permissible. Additional capitation funding will be linked to the availability of afterschool care options, where demand exists.

## **7. Special Needs Education**

Over €1.4billion is spent on special education annually, yet families still face anxiety in accessing services. We will examine the adequacy of current special education access and funding provision, in particular for children with Down syndrome. We will request the National Council for Special Education advice on how best to address this. Where efficiencies are made as part of this review, consideration is to be given to the extension of the July Provision Programme to support families over summer months.

We will also consult with stakeholders to see how best to progress sections of the EPSEN Act that were introduced on a non-statutory basis.

A new model of In-School Speech and Language Therapy will be established. It has been shown across the OECD as the most effective way of managing and intervening with the educational and social issues consequential to speech and language difficulties in children. It will involve greater collaboration between parents, schools and primary care services that has been proven to be effective internationally.

We will also invest additional resources in the National Educational Psychologists Service (NEPS) to ensure earlier intervention and access for young children (and also teenagers), and offer immediate support to schools in cases of critical incidents.

## **8. Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future**

A new architecture is required in education to really drive excellence and 'best in class' potential. We will change the structures of the Department of Education to ensure it operates as a dynamic policy leader focused on quality education and improving outcomes for every student.

We support the creation of Technological Universities, linked to industry and with the capacity to create and retain jobs in regions.

We will implement the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, published in December 2015.

We will support an increase in the number of flexible courses and opportunities available; giving people the opportunity to attend courses part time, during evenings, in the summer and at weekends. We support the introduction of mid-degree “sandwich year” courses, whereby students spend their third year of university working in industry.

Together with the Apprenticeship Council, Solas, the Education and Training Boards, and industry, we will double the number of apprenticeships by 2020. We will also significantly increase the number of traineeship places. We will develop a mechanism to recognise a person’s practical work experience and expertise in order to enable them to take on an apprentice.

We will deliver a step change in our capacity to educate, develop, deploy and retain talent, setting targets for critical skill provision and competitive funding models will encourage their delivery in partnership with enterprise. In order to achieve this we will:

- Create financial incentives for the third level system to respond to skills gaps
- Invite industry to partner in the delivery elements of the curricula at third and fourth levels
- Create a strong system for the delivery and renewal of skills in newly emerging technical areas (including apprenticeships, traineeships, and in service progression)

Significant exchequer resources are invested in both current and capital spending in the Higher Education sector. Following the publication of the Expert Group report on the Future Funding of the Higher Education Sector, we will propose that the relevant cross party Oireachtas Committee review its recommendations and outline a proposed funding plan for this sector. We will propose an examination of the efficiency and operation of SUSI in parallel with this report, including the potential of providing SUSI liaison personnel in each region

We support new flexibility for appropriate higher education institutions within strict budgets, transparency and new accountability agreements, to set their own staffing needs, hire the best lecturers, automate routine processes and adapt work practices to staff and student needs. By allowing universities more flexibilities and ‘earned autonomy’ they can prioritise and address issues themselves for the improvement of their institution, and the creation of a new relationship with students.

There has been significant change in the Further, Adult and Community Education sector in light of the dissolution of FAS and the VECs, and the establishment of new structures inclusive of SOLAS, Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI), and Education and Training Boards (ETBs). We will ensure that these new structures and systems are empowering those who did not get an equal opportunity for education in their youth, and that implementation of educational programs and skills training for those unemployed or underemployed are effective in supporting their path to quality employment. We will do this by initiating a Review of the Further, Adult and Community Education sector by the Oireachtas Committee on Education and an implementation of reforms to ensure the effectiveness of the sector.