

IPPN Budget Submission 2013



Prepared for:

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Table of Contents

1.1. Overall Education Spend	1
1.2. Running Costs	1
1.3. School Building and Relevant Contract Tax	1
1.4. Small Schools	2
1.5. Leadership Development.....	2
1.6. Marginalised children	2
1.7. Administrative systems.....	2
1.8. Teaching Principals.....	3
1.9. Information Technology	3
1.10. Conclusion	3

1.1. OVERALL EDUCATION SPEND

IPPN calls on the Ministers for Finance and Education & Skills to ensure that the primary education budget is ring fenced from further cuts. Current levels of funding are severely stretched to meet the basic operational needs of schools and have forced 100% of primary schools to engage in fundraising activities to pay for every day costs. Fundraising from primary school parents is a form of double taxation as 'voluntary contributions' are coming from after tax income. Why should parents pay on the double for primary education? Why is this the case in primary education, rare at second level and non-existent in third level?

1.2. RUNNING COSTS

IPPN calls for a reversal of the cuts to the primary capitation grant to recognise the reality that primary school funding is inadequate. Increased fuel and utility costs are now driving many schools into deficit situations. The evidence is clear – 100% of primary schools are fundraising to pay bills covering basic operational costs.

Now is the opportune time to develop a new structure for school funding. Serious consideration should be given to the streamlining of all school funding (including the Ancillary Services grant) into a single operational grant, paid quarterly, with the first payment lodged in school accounts before the start of the school year. This would give schools financial flexibility, reduce cash flow problems, and enable them to set their own priorities on spending.

1.3. SCHOOL BUILDING AND RELEVANT CONTRACT TAX

While it is sensible to pursue a school building programme that prioritises the provision of new school buildings for the increasing number of pupils entering the school system, it makes little sense that some schools are allowed fall into a state of disrepair due to the withdrawal of the Minor Works Grant. This grant is of vital importance to schools particularly those built before the year 2000, and must be restored immediately. Failure to do so will create a further draw on capital budgets in years to come – if we don't repair and maintain now, it will lead to bigger problems later on. This is basic economic sense.

Boards of Management and principals are now required to register as VAT collectors. Our research shows that two out of three boards do not have the necessary skills nor the finances to contract in those skills. It is anomalous that schools are required to register for VAT without being able to claim VAT back on their own expenditure. Could this anomaly be addressed by making all schools VAT exempt?

1.4. SMALL SCHOOLS

There is no educational rationale for the phasing out of small schools by the gradual but significant increase in class size. Evidence from the DES Inspectorate and other research casts a positive light on the educational experience of children in small schools. The economic argument put forward is largely based on 'funding inequality' i.e. that the level of funding per capita given to small schools exceeds that of larger disadvantaged schools in urban areas. In strict equality terms that may be true but the argument here isn't about equality but about equity. There are many forms of disadvantage - economic, social, educational etc. Remoteness is also a form of disadvantage as it costs so much more to parents the further they have to travel for basic services. To close smaller schools by whatever means further disadvantages families and increases the inequity between those in remote areas and their urban counterparts. In addition, small schools are typically in sound structural condition. Closing down one school in most cases would almost inevitably lead to the need to build an extension in another school to accommodate the additional pupils. Ultimately, when examining the practicalities of closing down small schools, there is no sound economic argument.

1.5. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The government must reaffirm its commitment to school leadership (cf Programme for Government) through the restoration of adequate professional development of school leaders. Independent research shows that, in order to bring about improved educational outcomes, the best value for money is to focus on up-skilling and empowering the school principal, whose influence percolates throughout the school.

1.6. MARGINALISED CHILDREN

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 government continues to withdraw funding from children with special educational needs. IPPN strongly appeals to the government to reinstate 2010 levels of resourcing to children with special educational needs, Traveller children, children from disadvantaged homes and children for whom English is not their first language.

1.7. ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS

IPPN has been calling for the establishment of a Primary Pupil Data Base as a matter of urgency since 2002. Having access to such technology would actually lead to cost savings as it would enable accurate targeting of resources using formula-based funding. It would also enable the efficient allocation of resources, eliminate duplication and streamline administrative practices within the Department of Education and Skills and within schools.

The DES has provided second-level schools with administrative software to enable efficient data management and reporting. Significant savings can be made through the provision of similar software in primary schools. Currently schools that have invested in software systems are required to maintain hard copy roll books and registers. This is a needless duplication of effort and a waste of valuable time both in schools and in the DES.

1.8. TEACHING PRINCIPALS

Almost 70% of Principals are also full-time class teachers. In order to fulfil the functions of class teacher and school principal, the current level of non-teaching time must be increased to one day per week. This is the minimum allocation of time provided in other countries, including the North of Ireland. Since Section 24 of the Education Act was commenced, principals have an important responsibility to monitor and manage teaching and learning throughout the school. This requires consistent opportunities for principals to work with and observe other teachers in their classrooms. The ideal solution is to create one extra post per five schools where the same teacher consistently relieves teaching principals one day per week.

Alternatively, where two or three schools' enrolment exceed the threshold for the appointment of an administrative principal (178 children), an administrative principal should be appointed to a cluster of small schools.

1.9. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Multi-national and Irish employers are consistently alerting government to the impact on our economy arising from the shortage of science and technology skills. Already Irish primary education is at least a decade behind virtually all other OECD countries in relation to ICT provision and usage. IPPN strongly recommends the provision of a multi-annual budget for ICT in schools. An integrated ICT-supported curriculum must be put in place to enable Ireland keep pace with our OECD neighbours and competitors. The time has come for action. A decision needs to be taken to teach a single subject, e.g. science or maths, through the medium of technology from Junior Infants to Leaving Cert. Unless this decision is made, we will continue to flounder in excuses for inaction. For this to become a reality, government must ensure that all schools have access to high speed broadband. Currently 20% of schools do not have a reliable broadband service.

1.10. CONCLUSION

IPPN believes that

- any reduction in school funding at primary level will have a catastrophic effect on our endeavour to raise the standards of literacy and numeracy that are required to build an education system fit for the future
- teaching principals must be enabled to carry out their leadership function as well as their class teaching role
- significant savings and efficiencies can be made by investing in ICT in schools
- we have a moral obligation to protect the marginalised.

In addition, the DES should

- develop a formula-based funding structure to replace capitation-style grants which do not reflect the individual needs of children or schools
- reinstate the Minor Works Grant
- provide practical support for school leaders.