

# JMB Pre-Budget Submission 2027

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## Institutional Reform and Infrastructural Capacity

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### Introduction

*‘Significant change in the form of implementing specific innovations can be expected to take a minimum of two to three years; bringing about institutional reforms can take five or ten years. At the same time, we must work on changing infrastructure (policies, incentives, capacity of all agencies and agents at all levels) so that valued gains can be sustained and built-upon’.*

Michael Fullan (2001)

One of the greatest threats to deep and meaningful change in education is the risk of superficial compliance arising from waves-without-troughs of successive and cumulative policy demand. This is, in effect, a subconscious anxiety-management response on the part of overwhelmed teachers and school leaders, one of whom described themselves as *‘rushed, crunched, isolated, distrusted, and undervalued’*. No wonder we are in the midst of crises in both teacher and principal recruitment and retention.

Michael Fullan, the internationally recognised authority in leading and managing educational change, also said:

*‘My first conclusion, at this juncture in the Irish Education Reform agenda, is that principalship needs serious attention that it has not yet received. The time is right to change this and to follow through with action that will strengthen the role and impact principals can have in school improvement in the 21st century’<sup>1</sup>.*

This statement was made two decades ago and in advance of the tsunami of policy directives and imperatives placing apex-level responsibilities on principals, deputy principals, and their Boards of Management including:

Senior Cycle redevelopment; a revised and compulsory Wellbeing Framework; implementing new Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students with SEN; establishment of a minimum of two, and up to six, special classes in every school; managing increasing numbers of SNAs as a staff-within-a-staff; compliance with revised Child Protection Revised Procedures; review of the school’s Code of Behaviour; rollout of free schoolbooks; developing and implementing a Whole School Guidance Plan; delivering the Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour; deploying the Behaviours of Concern and the Relate Framework; leading on Junior Cycle Framework redevelopment; providing a Digital Learning Framework; leading School Self-Evaluation Cycles; ensuring the school has a Data Protection Policy and associated compliance; implementing Revised Admissions Procedures; complying with new

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<sup>1</sup> FULLAN, M. (2006) *Quality Leadership - Quality Learning*, Cork, Irish Primary Principal’s Network.

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Literacy and Numeracy Guidelines, not to mention a raft of other human resource, health and safety, financial management, and ever-expanding reporting obligations ranging from student absenteeism to instances of restraint.

It is the clear view of the JMB that giving principalship the ‘serious attention that it has not yet received’ translates into ‘giving senior school leadership the capacity enhancement it has not yet received’.

Imagine you are on a flight, and, during a patch of bad turbulence, you look up to see the co-pilot pushing the refreshment trolley down the aisle, enquiring whether passengers want tea or coffee. When you ask why they’re not in the cockpit at this demanding time, you’re told that this flight is less than full and company policy only allocates fractions of co-pilot time in such cases.

This is what it feels like to have a fraction of a deputy principal allocation in a contemporary secondary school. The same can be said of inadequate deputy principal provision right across the post primary sector.

Effective change takes time and is a process of ‘development in use’, i.e., it is an evolutionary process involving clarification of expectation, communication of a rationale for change, structured reflection on action and intermediate outcomes, context-specific pacing of innovation, constant reassurance around progress, modelling of desired behaviours, a positive disposition toward conflict and disagreement, iterative planning, and a deep knowledge of change processes.

In short; Available, Agentic, and Authoritative Leadership.

Our Pre-Budget Submission 2027 sets out the core areas the Joint Managerial Body considers as requiring the ‘serious attention school leadership has not yet received’. As a very modest first step in the direction of acknowledging that senior leadership is centrally important in the achievement of good educational outcomes and thriving school communities, the following principles must underpin future deputy principal allocation ratios:

- › The DP to student ratio in larger schools currently allocates one deputy principal to 300 students
- › Smaller and medium-sized schools should have an equitable allocation, and maintain the same ratio of 1:300

Exceptions to the 1:300 ratio should include:

- › Schools in the DEIS programme at the enrolment category 500 to 599, which require two deputy principals and schools in the DEIS programme at the enrolment category 700 to 899, which require three deputy principals
- › All schools at enrolment category 150-299 to increase from 0.5 to 1.0 deputy principal posts

This submission tracks specific actions within the strategic goals set out in *‘Inclusive education for all: Department of Education and Youth Statement of Strategy 2025–2028’*<sup>2</sup>. The goals are:

- › **Goal 1** – Deliver a learning experience for students to highest international standards
- › **Goal 2** – Break down barriers for groups at risk of exclusion
- › **Goal 3** – Equip learners of all ages and abilities to participate and succeed in a changing world
- › **Goal 4** – Support Ireland to be a leader across a broad range of fields
- › **Goal 5** – Support students and all those who work in the education sector

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2 [https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/92422c98/IAE\\_strategy.pdf](https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/92422c98/IAE_strategy.pdf)

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# Goal 1: Deliver a learning experience for students to highest international standards

## Objectives

- › Improve quality, promote excellence and innovation, and increase autonomy for schools
- › Continue to implement curriculum reform to ensure that children have the critical skills, knowledge and competences they need to succeed and thrive in a rapidly changing world.
- › Promote high quality practice and provide quality assurance through implementation of a responsive programme of school inspections and educational advice, and by supporting the development of school selfevaluation processes.
- › Implement policies and improve supports for learners with special education needs to support their participation and progression through the education system
- › Put in place comprehensive workforce development plans to improve teacher supply and underpin the quality and sustainability of the workforce in our schools.

## Special Educational Needs

### Soundings

The astonishing increases in the prevalence of the disorder are what has led to the concern for some that autism is now significantly overdiagnosed.

... and yet, despite the substantial rise in diagnoses, many autism specialists are certain that there is still an underdiagnosis problem, especially in girls and women.

*The Age of Diagnosis* (p.114) Dr Suzanne O'Sullivan (2025)

The Department of Education and Youth is committed to an education-based, needs-led approach to accessing education services. The vast majority of children with special educational needs are supported to attend mainstream classes with their peers, through the provision of resources such as Special Education Teachers and Special Needs Assistants. This is an estimated 25% of the total student population, or 240,000 children and young people with special educational needs, that are supported in mainstream classes.

Clarifications on the Assessment of Need Process Following Recent Announcement by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality [DEY: 9th December 2025]

School principals, given the implications of the reforms for them, hold additional responsibility for interpreting and managing complex systems for allocation, accountability, and staff fidelity within whole school inclusion. Overall resources available are seen as falling short of what is required to adequately support students and meet all needs. To some extent this reflects differential allocations for the voluntary sector.

*'Embracing Diversity in all its Forms': The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education* (ESRI, 2024)

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## The Policy and System Contexts

As a general rule, system-level factors tend to be shaped by the policy demands of the time. In terms of the provision of special class and school placements for students diagnosed as requiring such settings, an incremental increase in budgetary provision and revised annual caps on special setting places have been behind the need-curve in terms of the capital investment required and the acute build-up of pressure on places.

Budget 2026 provided for an additional 433 special classes at primary and post primary levels and 400 special school places for the 2026/27 school year. Within weeks of the publication of the Budget, it became clear that the demand for places, allowing for 'leavers', would require significantly greater provision over and above those budget caps in terms of special class and special school places.

The surge in demand emerged via the NCSE Parents Notify email channel and raises a set of critical questions which will need to be addressed by the whole of government, not just the Department of Education and Youth:

- › Is this spike in applications a once-off phenomenon, the result of pent-up demand?
- › What are the drivers behind the annual increase in applications for special setting placements, notwithstanding this year's surge?
- › Are parents locked into a diagnosis-driven model of provision, seeing this as the only pathway to special education resourcing for their child?
- › Is a diagnostic report industry emerging from this funnelling of a monolithic provision model?
- › Will the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform approve over-budget spending to address what parents believe to be a fundamental right?
- › How can schools be expected to accommodate, and try to integrate, ever-increasing populations of children and young people with profound and enduring challenges, the vast majority of which relate to autism spectrum disorders?
- › And finally, is there an alternative to the current special setting model; what are the risks associated with an incoherent and rushed restructuring of provision, and will such a fragmentation be driven solely by budgetary concerns as opposed to a concern for child, family, and school?

The pressures at political level to resolve placement challenges are producing evidence of panic, or at least discontinuity of message across relevant government departments. In a rush to clarify such mixed messaging, around Assessment of Need reports in particular, the Department of Education revealed its thinking beyond the AON issue, pointing to a radical shift in access criteria to special classes and schools:

- › While a diagnosis is currently required to access a special class or a special school, this does not have to be linked to an AON. Department officials are working on a process to remove the need for a diagnosis to access specialist supports in our school system which would be the last remaining requirement for a diagnosis in the education system.
- › The Department of Education and Youth will bring forward a proposal through a memorandum for government early in 2026 to agree a process which is intended to result in the removal of the requirement for professional reports, such as Assessment of Need reports, from entry requirements for special schools and special classes and the adoption of a needs-based approach, subject to the availability of necessary resources.

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This final sentence carries significant implications for schools. Who, and how will the specific educational and welfare needs of students with profound and enduring conditions be determined? The unspoken implication is that the school will carry this responsibility.

Similarly, 'the adoption of a needs-based approach subject to the availability of necessary resources' implies both a radical replacement of clinical and psychological determination of need and, as ever, resource restrictions leaving schools with all the responsibility and insufficient qualified personnel, time, capital funding, or senior leadership capacity to implement.

If such seismic restructuring of the current model is imposed in a rushed and incoherent manner, schools will be unable to cope. What is needed is a return to the NCSE policy advice paper of 2024, *'An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society'* adopted by both the Minister for Education and The Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion, but since largely ignored at policy level. The paper's professionally researched and consulted-upon recommendations bear re-stating at this inflection point in Ireland's journey toward authentic inclusion in education as these point to a progressive pathway to a fit-for-purpose continuum of service aligning with our international commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

#### ***The progressive realisation of an inclusive school system***

The key word here is *'Progressive'*. A rushed and radical conceptualisation of inclusion will inevitably lead, at both political and parental levels, to radical expectations of their local school in terms of enrolment, provision, and outcomes – where will a line be drawn under a school's capacity to deliver on this commitment? Every single pillar of activity and ambition set out in the NCSE report as they apply to schools will require to be matched by the state in its short, medium, and long-term budgetary strategies for many years to come, and the practice of citing DPER as the limiting factor for virtually every initiative, resource, and investment will need to be resolved at the Cabinet table.

#### ***Greater availability of therapeutic and psychological supports***

The emergence of an Educational Therapy Service (ETS) under the remit of NCSE represents a hugely significant development and both government and the NCSE are to be congratulated on this investment. Though currently rolled out in special school settings, proposals for mainstreaming the service in a short timeframe are in train and our schools will soon see the benefits of this new service in terms of OT and SLT access. Meanwhile, there continues to be significant unmet demand for psychological and psychotherapeutic services to schools and this requires the immediate attention of the Department.

#### ***Expansion of NEPS to ensure that all schools in Ireland have access to a comprehensive educational psychological service to support the inclusion and participation of all students, including those with complex special educational needs***

An expansion in recruitment alone will not provide the capacity to deliver on the extraordinary levels of need emerging under a rights-based access to mainstream schooling by children and young people with profound, complex, layered, and enduring conditions and challenges. A radical reframing of both mandate and model of service by NEPS will be required if schools are to be properly supported and accompanied on their inclusion journeys.

#### ***Enhanced teacher professional learning, particularly for teachers in special settings ... and additional professional learning opportunities for school leaders and teachers so they can provide an education appropriate to all their students***

Even in advance of the proposed significant policy and practice shifts, schools are struggling to source appropriately qualified special education teachers, guidance counsellors, and teachers with the experience and capacity to lead and coordinate in-school SEN provision. In particular, the expansion of special class

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provision in mainstream secondary schools has brought with it an urgent need for professionalising our approaches to behaviours of concern. Our teachers and school leaders require relevant and immediate professional development opportunities around the challenges involved in realising authentic inclusive practice in mainstream classes and school communities.

***Improvements to school buildings to ensure they embed a Universal Design for Learning and are fit for purpose for the accommodation and education of students with complex needs***

The building stock in the voluntary secondary sector comprises some of the oldest still-functioning structures in the state. Capital investment in terms of additional accommodation, new builds, significant refurbishment and equipping has clearly proved to be a stumbling block to the Department in recent years and its reliance on modularised solutions not always feasible in our school's restricted sites. Aspiring to a UDL architecture seems, in this context, to be generations away and will demand a whole of government approach and mindset in terms of investment.

***Curriculum change and greater certification options for students with special educational needs***

It took our educational system over five years to introduce progression routes into senior cycle for students undertaking L1 and L2 Learning Programmes at junior cycle. In this time, students with such significant needs have been inappropriately channelled into LCA programmes, where they exist, with consequent impacts on learning experience and outcomes for these students and their peers, as well as for their teachers and parents. What is needed is a big-picture approach to curricular flexibility, and a new degree of agility in terms of specification development.

***Resolution of problems around placement ... and annual reviews of placement, progress, and attainment***

The perception that students in special education provision in mainstream settings are stranded in ASD or MGLD classes with no review, adjustment, or access to other programmes or levels does not reflect the reality in our schools. Dual enrolment is also a key requirement; otherwise how can we say that the aim is inclusion if there are no mainstream places in the corresponding year? Another barrier to provision mapping for individual students has been the dearth of accessible professional therapeutic and psychological recommendations and supports. Schools are forced to take significant decisions without having their judgements augmented by other relevant sources of insight and advice and until this is addressed, schools will continue to carry serious anxieties around their capacity to stand over goals set out in student support plans. Finally, the demands placed on mainstream teachers require a corresponding reduction in PTR to meet the differentiated teaching and learning needs of the complete range of students in any one class.

***Resolution of the issues experienced by students having to travel long distances from their homes to attend special education schools or classes***

The ultimate goal of having students of all capacities attend school within their local community will eventually reduce reliance on longer distance transport solutions and to achieve this, the state will require to make inclusive education provision a national budgetary priority in terms of joint campuses, co-location, school extensions, new builds and equipping. Meanwhile, school transport is essentially a social equity measure and, as such, both the Department and the transport providers should be prepared to (literally) go the extra mile in ensuring appropriate provision is made for the most vulnerable children and young people in our care.

***The development and implementation of a national system for schools to determine, measure, and report on student progress and outcomes***

This particular requirement will, in our opinion, require to be driven by legislation and, in particular, by a successor to the EPSEN Act (2004). The uncommenced sections of the Act left a lacuna in terms

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of provision mapping, target setting, and tracking, which in turn led to a failure to resource individual education planning and consequent teacher union directives around non-cooperation with IEPs or their proxies. School management has therefore been caught in the middle, with responsibilities but no mandate, resourcing, or professional support. Whatever emerges from the EPSEN review must carry with it a significant superstructure of capacity and authority and not have yet another 'Irish solution' which fails to address the core issues at stake.

***The provision of further guidance to school leaders on the utilisation and deployment of school staff, in order to support the management and deployment of the range of supports available to schools***

The Department can produce all the guidance it wishes but if the capacity to deliver is not in place, all the PDFs and webinars in the world will not have their guidelines implemented. What is essential is an enhancement of the leadership capacity at deputy principal level across the post primary system and our recommendation around sustainable leadership remains our strongest claim on Budget 2027.

***Enhancement of guidance to schools to ensure that teachers are competent and supported in assessing students' needs, identifying any additional supports required, and accessing and utilising those supports. This includes inclusive guidance to support students' decision making on post school options***

Enhanced professionalisation measures are, of course, necessary if the teaching workforce is to be expected to carry this hugely significant inclusion responsibility on behalf of the state. In light of the tiny allocation in Budget 2026 for SEN Coordination, we must continue to arbitrarily determine what we can ethically take from the SET allocation to students but if this is inadequate and unsatisfactory now, it will certainly be so when the new wave of policies and expectations land at school level. It is high time to make SEN Coordination a priority and to give it its rightful place in the lifeworld and systemsworld of the contemporary school. Our proposal for such capacity enhancement is set out in the next section.

***The development of an assessment framework to support identifying the needs of students who will continue to require highly specialised supports and provision***

The exclusion of complex need as one of the determining criteria for special education teacher allocation from 2024 pointed to a policy level move away from what was previously called 'low incidence' provision and a recognition of the system level reluctance to cope with complex needs. Teachers and school leaders, however, do not have this 'set-aside' freedom. Of course, assessment frameworks will support complex need identification, but nothing will replace the levels of insight from either parents or an education psychologist and enabling measures must be put in place to provide for both.

In light of such rapidly evolving demands on schools to meet these policy objectives, it is clearly inarguable that the provision of adequate leadership structures, time for SEN coordination and a reduced mainstream PTR require to be urgently reconsidered by the Department.

## **The School Context**

The current emphasis at system level around special class deployment is displacing a recognition of the wonderful work and achievements of teachers and special needs assistants in integrating and educating young people right across the school community. In our sector, voluntary secondary schools are extraordinarily inclusive, innovative, professionally committed, and welcoming communities, building on strong ethical and, indeed, spiritual foundations when it comes to living out each school's expressed ethos. The recent and ongoing increased investment by the state in the expansion of services provided by the National Council for Special Education is now paying dividends in terms of the support services available to schools and an enhancement of professionalisation at both local and regional levels.

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That said, the state's policy of educating virtually every child and young person in their local, mainstream setting will demand investments in people, plant, and professionalisation if we are, as a nation, to begin to achieve in reality the levels of inclusion to which we aspire in rhetoric.

## *People*

The educational enterprise is essentially the nation's moral agency in action. It is enacted by people, with people, for people, and is lived out in a highly relational context. That the phrase '*I really miss my teachers*' was repeatedly echoed by children and young people during the pandemic closures gives testament to irreplaceability of good adults in the lives and learning journeys of the one-million children and teenagers crossing our school gates each day.

School communities therefore require to be led by people who are ethical, caring, and competent. Evidence of the calibre of our school leaders can be found not alone in the high levels of trust they enjoy amongst parents, fellow educators, and young people, but also in the research base. The ESRI Report '*Embracing Diversity in all its Forms: The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education (2024)*<sup>3</sup> provides an independent and authoritative exposition of the quality of leadership evident in our sector and of its unique expression in terms of characteristic spirit and values-in-action.

Nonetheless, the JMB is highly concerned that the state, and the Department in particular, are taking this national resource for granted.

Many of our principals have been running on empty; many considering exit strategies; recruitment of principals is in crisis, and pleas for sustainability increase every year. Such a crisis in contemporary school leadership represents perhaps the ultimate threat to the government's agenda of legally mandated, rights-based maximum inclusion: who will lead it? Not the government, not the Department, not NCSE, NEPS, the HSE, or any other agency. School principals will, ultimately, carry virtually all the responsibility and if their current work, worry, and responsibility loads are unsustainable, what chance is there for a whole new raft of responsibility, work, and worry to be tolerated by them?

In this context, the ESRI study (2024, p. 204) concluded:

'... there were repeated concerns over the demands placed on school leaders, the adequacy of supports provided, and the widespread implications in terms of burnout and retention:

*The job of principal is very, very demanding, very challenging, emotionally draining.* (Stakeholder interview)

*Schools are being asked to do more and more and more. ... I'm 54, and I'm not going to be principal when I'm 60. I do that and I'll be dead by 61... It's not the workload per se, it's the absolute bombardment of workload ... this job will kill you if you stay too long.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

It is therefore no longer acceptable that a school principal remains overwhelmed by administrative and other non-core workloads, as well as their unrecognised responsibility for the management and administration of an entire staff-within-a-staff of special needs assistants. Schools need a unitary leader, but to exercise the type of transformational leadership demanded of them, a fit-for-purpose senior leadership tier is essential if a fit-for-purpose school organisation is to be created, with appropriate and tiered line management to incorporate all staff, reporting structures, and communication pathways.

Schools with additional DPs consistently report an immediate and significant increase in dedicated leadership effectiveness in relation to, for example, working with the special education core team and

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3 ['Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI](#)

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SNAs. As will be set out later in this submission, our contention is that the systems-level knowledge, authority, and agency at school level can best be mediated by a deputy principal reporting to the principal.

### **Plant**

The expectation that every secondary school can find appropriate accommodation for up to four special classes in addition to housing their schedule of mainstream classes, not to mention the requirement for large-scale class movement and social areas, is clearly unrealistic. Audits by the Department and site visits by the NCSE aimed at identifying ‘unused spaces’ in which to site further special classes ignore the social realities and needs of teenagers, adults, and the emotional impact of overcrowding on the teaching and learning process.

Many voluntary secondary schools have been serving their communities for more than 100 years. Many were built or extended-to with limited or no State assistance and are now in need of major refurbishment and extensions. If the current surge in special class demand is translated into school-level rollout, the pressure on the voluntary secondary sector building stock will become intolerable.

In this context, the Department, and government as a whole, must address the challenges that both system and school require to be resolved as long as the current provision model remains in place. These are:

#### **Capital Release**

The Programme for Government commits itself to:

- › *Continue to increase the number of special schools and special classes across the country to ensure that children can go to school within their local community.*

It cannot achieve this on a shoestring and the practice of funding the Department on a strictly limited and annualised model<sup>4</sup> with no recourse to additionality leads, no doubt, to fraught Cabinet discussions, and ministers unable to manage contingencies such as the present order-of-magnitude increase in special place applications.

#### **Sourcing Modular Accommodation**

While the quality and standard of modular accommodation have substantially improved in recent years, access to such buildings is severely restricted, leaving schools willing and happy to establish special classes, unable to do so in light of the excessively long lead-in timeframe.

This, again, requires the Department to develop a multi-year budgeting process to allow forward planning of permanent and modular accommodation to be reliably resourced. At the heart of this issue lies the inability of the system to reliably predict need and the inadequacy of the Department’s NDP Sectoral Investment Plan 2026-2030 which provides a €7.55 billion capital envelope for schools and the youth sector. More accurately, funding is profiled annually through the Estimates process, and individual project approvals are issued year-by-year within the NDP ceiling.

In this context, the significantly improved and improving data management strategy adopted by the NCSE should now allow for a more accurate modelling of need. It is time the Department and its agencies were afforded the flexibility of funding to adequately respond in an agile manner to a demand characterised by inherent flux. In essence, if the NCSE could identify need two years in advance then building and staffing would be predicted and planned for in a more coherent way. This requires looking at the admissions process and legislation and it is hoped the relevant recommendations in the EPSEN review will be adopted.

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<sup>4</sup> Government’s NDP funding model is multi annual but is completely inadequate in terms of meeting demand

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## Simplifying Project Rollout

Schools requiring significant works relating to the opening of a new special class in existing accommodation will require to have a detailed technical assessment undertaken, have the scope of the necessary works validated, and only be considered as part of the wider capital programme and prioritised accordingly. Again, it is the capital programme macro-funding that limits such developments and points to a need for more realistic investment by government in line with forecasted demand.

## Professionalisation

### Classroom Teachers

Special settings aside, the vast majority of students facing learning challenges are educated in mainstream schools and classes. In light of the greater mobility and flexibility demanded by current policy, a core task of system and school leadership lies in how effectively we can influence teachers' beliefs in their capacity to educate all. In essence, what is required of principals is that they work continually with their colleagues to answer these three questions:

1. *Present*: Are all our students attending, and are they all visible in the spaces and events where our school community has ownership?
2. *Participating*: Are all our students able to join in in the life of our school in its fullest sense, does everyone feel welcome and valued?
3. *Progressing*: Are all our students achieving, and are all our students able to be ambitious about their goals?

The research clearly indicates that 'leaders who actively foster inclusive practices, and expound this commitment through running disciplined, continuous improvement cycles (done collaboratively with teachers, students, and parents) improve levels of presence, participation and progress for all pupils'<sup>5</sup>.

To achieve these goals, however, all teachers in the school must be supported in migrating their beliefs, (and therefore their professional dispositions), from this:

- › Disability is inherent and unchangeable
- › Impairment or deficits are fixed and within the learner
- › Teaching can't change disability
- › Teaching can't increase potential
- › Specialist knowledge is needed which I don't have
- › The needs of children with disabilities are better met outside my classroom

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5 Carrington, 2024; DeMatthews et al., 2020

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... to this:

- › Ability and potential are not fixed but fluid
- › Teachers should have high expectations of all students, including those with disabilities
- › Teaching makes a difference
- › Barriers are contextual not inherent
- › My teaching will make a difference
- › I am responsible for all students learning including those with disabilities, and I have the ability to teach all students
- › I am part of a team

The goodwill, moral agency, and willingness of our nation's teaching workforce is not in question. What is, however, required, is 'a style in which principals set direction, develop people, and redesign the organisation so that teachers are motivated and able to bring about greater learning for all students, including those with special educational needs'<sup>6</sup>

JMB thus calls for a focussed, coherent approach to senior leadership development and professional learning in the area of inclusion, as well as the provision of additional deputy principals in order to activate these necessary professionalisation conditions.

### **Special Education Teachers**

To enhance their effectiveness and, indeed, status, across the school and system, SETs require their workloads to be manageable, their professional learning and qualifications to be state funded and accredited, their capacity to work as effective teams developed, and their identity recognised by the Teaching Council.

We propose that a review of the availability of funded special education qualifications should take place to ensure that experienced teachers can access such programmes. The number of places needs to be expanded while soft barriers to entry also need to be addressed. These include challenges schools may have in releasing teachers given the accessibility of programmes which may not be family-friendly for reasons of geography or course design.

### **Special Educational Needs Coordination Teams**

As a matter of urgency, government must make much more realistic provision for team-based SEN coordination time. The JMB has repeatedly asserted the need for dedicated special needs coordination, planning, tracking, consultation, and reporting in every school, and this requirement will manifest itself clearly when the NCSE's revised Quality Practice Framework around inclusion is published.

The coordination demands are increasing year on year, with additional responsibilities since 2017 set out in a joint submission by the three post-primary management bodies in 2024:

School leaders, SENCOs and SETs have a broader role in supporting students with identified (transient and/or emerging) needs across all levels of the Continuum of Support. Since the introduction of SETAM in 2017, categorical and entrenched deficit views of disability are being replaced by socially responsive approaches to inclusion of children and young people with diverse needs. Such a shift necessitates a repositioning and reconceptualisation of the roles of SENCOs and core SETs, from one involved in

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6 Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005, p12

remediating the curriculum for children and young people unable to access it, to roles which assume key pedagogical leadership to enable and empower school communities to maximise opportunities for these students (Fitzgerald 2022). SETAM engenders greater levels of teacher autonomy in how to 'manage and deploy additional teaching support' (DES 2017, p.2). Demands arising from this autonomy place greater accountability and responsibility on school principals and teachers to identify and prioritise students with the greatest level of need, and to allocate resources accordingly. This responsibility rests with principals, SENCOs and core SETs (Curtin and Egan 2021).

To meet such an expansion in responsibility, the post primary management bodies are seeking a realistic additional allocation of ring-fenced hours calculated on the basis of the school's SET Allocation as set out in Circular 03/2024 for SEN leadership and coordination. The resource implication is set out as:

<b>Ring-Fenced Allocation of Hours for Leadership and Coordination of SEN</b>		
<b>Total SET Allocation to Post primary Schools 2024-2025*</b>	<b>8.5% Ring-fenced Allocation for Leadership and Coordination</b>	<b>WTE Equivalent Posts**</b>
108,570	9228	419 WTE Posts

\* Excluding special class and temporary allocations

\*\* As these are ringfenced hours allocated to the school, we believe the cost to the Exchequer will be significantly less.

In terms of deployment, the following provisions will apply:

- The school principals shall flexibly deploy all additional ring-fenced hours to members of the core SEN Team only.
- These ring-fenced hours shall be deployed, in addition to the flexible use of coordination time accessed through schools' existing SET Allocations, to the SENCO(s) and members of the core SEN Team for the purposes of leading and coordinating inclusive special education teaching practices. This would enable SENCOs and the core SEN Team to lead systematic, collaborative, evidence-informed team approaches to maximise student outcomes.
- To support sustainable approaches to leadership and coordination of SEN over time, we are prioritising flexible deployment of ring-fenced time to the core SEN Team. This approach facilitates distribution and rotation of responsibilities across the team and recognises the specialist skills, knowledge and competencies required of SETs to undertake this work.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › The JMB urges the Department and Government to avoid reactive, incoherent responses to the increase in demand for special education settings and to commence what the NCSE policy advice recommendation terms ‘The progressive realisation of an inclusive school system’
- › JMB is calling for dedicated professional learning provision to principals and deputies in the area of SEN-specific leadership, and for a significant expansion of funded access for teachers to post-graduate diploma programmes in special education
- › JMB contends that the systems-level knowledge, authority, and agency at school level can best be mediated by a core SEN team working with a deputy principal(s) rather than single-teacher posts of responsibility
- › To enhance their effectiveness and, indeed, status, across the school and system, SETs require their workloads to be manageable, their professional learning and qualifications to be funded and accredited, their capacity to work as effective teams developed, and their identity recognised by the Teaching Council
- › To meet the expansion in responsibility for special education provision at school level, we are seeking a realistic additional allocation of ring-fenced hours calculated on the basis of the school’s SET Allocation as set out in Circular 03/2024 for SEN leadership and coordination
- › The Programme for Government commitments to continue to increase the number of special schools and special classes and to streamline the delivery of modular accommodation will require increased funding to the NDP and a multi-annual commitment to major capital release from DPER and the Department of Finance in the 2027 Budget
- › Principals do not receive any recognition for the additional staffing responsibilities as a result of their SNA allocation, which can be substantial, and this anomaly must be addressed in advance of any changes to this particular sector of our schools’ workforce
- › Under the current SNA workforce review, a structure for in-school management of SNAs should be designed, resourced, and implemented

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## School Leadership – The Challenge of Capacity-Building

Decades of underfunding followed by educational initiative after initiative to be implemented have led to unprecedented levels of burnout. Principals welcome needed educational innovations. They just need reasonable timeframes and resources to implement them. An advertised post for a principal that a decade ago would have attracted ten candidates now may attract one or two candidates and, in some cases, none. Fewer and fewer people want the grief. It boils down to a lack of real support for principals, particularly in the areas of administration, human resources, information technology, and the maintenance of buildings. Meanwhile, the additional areas of responsibility principals are expected to oversee continue to cascade. *Let principals do what they most want to do - lead learning in schools*

Irish Times<sup>7</sup> (2021)

*'More posts of responsibility are not the answer – any school over 600 should have two deputies. Over 700 or 750, three deputies. You need to expand the senior leadership team, don't expand the middle leadership team. Middle leadership team can only do so much ... There's only a certain amount of responsibility you can put on post-holders, the rest comes back to the principal because you can't expect people at that level to take on that level of responsibility.'* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

ESRI Report (2024)<sup>8</sup>

A stakeholder interview highlighted deep concern over the shrinking pool of applicants, with instances where the number of applications for principalship positions dropped significantly, sometimes to as low as one. This trend has forced schools to readvertise and struggle with appointing suitable candidates:

*'We would be very, very, very concerned about the drop in or the small number of applications for senior leadership positions ... particularly for principalship ... We haven't yet reached the stage where we couldn't appoint, but we've become very close to it. We've had to readvertise on a number of occasions. ... From experience we would have had for principalship 7 to 15 applications, whereas now we could have anything from 2 to 5 or 6, depending on the location. We have had situations where we've had one [application]'*. (Stakeholder interview)

ESRI Report (2024)<sup>9</sup>

For evidence of the low priority our government assigns to senior school leadership, we can look to both the *Department of Education and Youth: Statement of Strategy 2025–2028*<sup>10</sup>, which mentions school leadership just once, in the preamble, and to the trend now visible in its budgetary investment strategy. Deploying a cut-and-paste exercise in successive Budgets, the Department was resourced by government to assign derisory additional funding to enhancing its school leadership allocation, amounting to just €4m of its 2025 overall budget of €11,800,000,000 and even less for 2026, allocating only €3m from an increased education vote of €13,075,000,000:

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7 <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/crisis-in-recruitment-and-retention-of-school-principals-will-only-worsen->

8 'Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI

9 'Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI

10 [https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/92422c98/IAE\\_strategy.pdf](https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/92422c98/IAE_strategy.pdf)

*'As part of Budget 2025, funding of €4 million will be made available to provide 1,000 additional posts of responsibility in the school system for the 2025/26 school year. This is in recognition that school leadership and management play a key role in improving educational outcomes by creating a positive school climate and environment as well as motivating and empowering educators and learners within their school communities'*<sup>11</sup>

*'As part of Budget 2026, funding of €3 million will be made available to provide for enhanced School Leadership with additional deputy principals in primary and post primary schools for the 2026/27 school year. This is a recognition that school leadership and management play a key role in improving educational outcomes by creating a positive school climate and environment as well as motivating and empowering educators and learners within their school communities'*<sup>12</sup>

The only encouraging signal has been a move from funding additional posts of responsibility to additional deputy principals, an argument JMB has been making for some years, and will have to re-make in this submission. If €3m across 4,000 schools represents a 'recognition of the key role school leadership and management plays', we still have much work to do to convince policymakers and politicians that their rhetoric and resourcing do not match.

That said, and to maximise the impact of the €3m allocation, JMB, with its partner management bodies, ETBI and ACCS, argued that the funding should be targeted to begin a journey towards the elimination of fractional deputy principal allocations across the system.

Table 1 focuses on Phase 1 of this approach, beginning with the enrolment bands where leadership stretch is most acute and where the augmenting of the Deputy Principal allocation to a full Deputy Principal post will have the most transformative impact.

This proposal indicates that 188 schools fall within enrolment bands between 150 than 400 students where an increase is needed, comprising 94 non-DEIS schools and 94 DEIS schools, requiring a total of 70.75 additional WTE Deputy Principal posts to give full effect to this model.

**Table 1: Proposal for an Initial Phase of Capacity Enhancement**

Pupil Enrolment Categories (Including PLC)	Current Deputy Principal Allocation per Enrolment Category (WTEs)		Proposed Increase Deputy Principal Allocation per Enrolment Category (WTEs)		Increase per enrolment category expressed in DP WTEs		Total Number of schools who benefit from the increase	
			Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS
1-150								
151-300	0.50	0.50	0.5	0.5	22	25.5	44	51
300-400	0.75	0.75	0.25	0.25	12.5	10.75	50	43
<b>Totals</b>					34.5 posts	36.25 posts	94	94

This focus on smaller schools is fully consistent with the principles and structure set out in a joint submission of April 2025 on *Enhancing Senior Leadership in Post-Primary Schools*. The original model proposed a fair and equitable distribution of leadership capacity across all schools, maintaining a

<sup>11</sup> <https://assets.gov.ie/306585/d14f1663-d3c5-4647-b67f-739ab208ac3b.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> [https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/9d9ef4d9/Dept\\_of\\_Education\\_and\\_Youth\\_-\\_Main\\_Features\\_Budget\\_2026.pdf](https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/9d9ef4d9/Dept_of_Education_and_Youth_-_Main_Features_Budget_2026.pdf)

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**minimum 1:300 student-to-Deputy-Principal ratio** and giving **specific priority to small schools of between 150 and 399 students**. Smaller schools experience the same breadth of inclusion, curriculum, and wellbeing demands as larger schools, yet operate with minimal senior leadership capacity. Targeting this cohort ensures that the Department's investment delivers maximum benefit for small schools due to the day-long, and year-long availability of DPs to parents, students and staff.

The management bodies further noted that the additional DEIS and DEIS Plus funding announced in Budget 2026 could appropriately meet the cost of the 36 WTE posts sought for DEIS schools.

The use of a proportion of Budget 2026 DEIS and DEIS Plus funding to meet the cost of Deputy Principals in DEIS schools is both evidence-based and strategically coherent. It recognises that the Deputy Principal plays a significant role in working with parents and students on issues arising from social deprivation. Leadership capacity is the single most significant in-school determinant of student progress and school improvement, as confirmed by the *ESRI (2024) Leadership Study* and the *Inspectorate Composite Report (2021–2023)* and is the key driver of the DEIS objectives of improved attendance, retention, and attainment. Directing part of the new DEIS allocation to fund Deputy Principals in DEIS schools ensures that the Department's investment translates immediately into strengthened whole-school coordination of wellbeing, inclusion, literacy and numeracy, and family engagement initiatives. This targeted application of DEIS resources therefore represents the most effective and sustainable mechanism for achieving measurable gains in outcomes for students experiencing educational disadvantage, while embedding accountability and coherence within the overall school-leadership structure.

In a parallel measure, the trialling of administrative supports to principals across a very small number of schools continues and JMB looks forward to an evaluation of its impact. For the avoidance of doubt, the JMB has long argued for alleviation of the overwhelming administrative burden on its principals and deputy principals but the complete absence of any mention of enhancing senior leadership allocation in the Programme for Government means Government and the Department will consider this *trialling* of a low-budget investment as 'job done' in terms of capacity building.

JMB considers that the Department should, in the first instance, establish the current extent of administrative supports in schools before developing another layer of administrative staffing at Grade 5. Indeed, it would make sense that the Department would follow through with developing an evidence-based allocation model of administrative support for all schools. Currently, while a salary scale for school secretaries has been established, there is no transparency on the current allocation model and therefore significant variation across schools on the scope and scale of their administrative support levels.

The JMB now finds itself requiring to re-state its position, and we urge the Government, Minister, and the Department to accept that only additional senior leadership will deliver on policy, not administrative assistance alone.

The JMB, as its highest budgetary priority, here sets out its case for a progressive extension of the Department's decision to provide for additional deputy principal capacity in post-primary schools. We make this our key policy position in light of:

- › the changed legislative and regulatory environment emerging as a result of government policy around the mainstreaming of virtually all students, including those with profound and enduring special educational needs, and,
- › the Department's own prioritisation of leadership for learning within a rapidly changing junior and senior cycle curricular landscape.

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The need for senior leadership teams to drive meaningful change at all levels of the school has never been more critical. Increased leadership capacity is essential to effect the deep change envisaged by current policy initiatives.

While the current *Inspectorate Report (2024) and Thematic Review* did not carry a specific focus on senior school leadership, the preceding report of 2021-2023 clearly recognised the centrality of effective school leadership:

- › ‘Schools with effective practices demonstrated proactive leadership in setting strategic goals, monitoring progress, fostering collaboration among staff and adapting strategies to ensure continuous improvement in learning, making good use of school self-evaluation in so doing’
- › ‘Post-primary education stands at a critical juncture, facing challenges and opportunities that will shape its future path. Looking forward, a strategic approach is essential: one that integrates the essential elements of strong leadership, innovative curriculum development, student wellbeing and belonging, and the creative and ethical use of digital technologies’
- › ‘Sustaining curriculum change and redevelopment requires effective and inspiring leadership in schools to ensure that children and young people are equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to engage successfully with the world around them’.

*For the avoidance of doubt, we are not seeking to attach specific responsibility for curriculum and/or inclusion to one or more deputy principals, as these policy demands can only be met on a school-wide basis. We are seeking enhanced capacity at senior leadership level to lead, collaborate, and support this evolving work and to meet the needs of the subject departments, inclusion teams, and individuals required to implement such significant change.*

Schools need a unitary leader, but to exercise the type of transformational leadership demanded of them, a fit-for-purpose senior leadership tier is essential if a fit-for-purpose school organisation is to be created, with appropriate and tiered line management to incorporate all staff, reporting structures, and communication pathways. Successful mediation of such policy demands also impacts on parents, teachers, subject departments, and students, and each need levels of sustained support which must be met as set out in the following table:

<b>Table 2: School Stakeholder Need</b>				
	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Individual Teachers</b>	<b>Subject Departments</b>	<b>Students</b>
<b>Deputy Principal Availability</b>	Year-round contactability for information, updates, explanation, and question-answering	Day-to-day availability for support, resolution of concerns, and professional conversation	Availability for meetings and planning discussions throughout the school term	Knowing a solution-provider is available throughout the school week and where to find them
<b>Authority</b>	Authority to actively listen, comprehend their needs, and come to implementable solutions	Senior leadership-level influence to support capacity-building  Mediating the impact of changes in assessment practices leading to more challenges requiring resolution	Attending meetings; facilitating teaching and learning collaborative discussions in line with national curriculum developments; authorising resourcing and deployment decisions; evolving the timetable to meet changing needs along with more complex scheduling and management of assessment elements	Capacity to support subject choice and subject change; problem resolution; progress monitoring and parent meetings; liaison with care team supports
<b>Agency</b>	Being proactive in terms of key communication points at induction; transitions; reporting; policy change; consultations etc.	Comprehending the interface between policy and practice at teacher level; having a shared language and professional understanding	Supporting and developing subject departments in terms of access to TPL, resources, and time; meeting SSE and Inspectorate expectations; taking steps to develop and support strong collaborative relationships	Knowing someone has the 'big picture' of current developments and how the school can change-manage to meet student need
<b>Access</b>	Often immediate or short-notice and requiring a private conversation space	Rapid policy change is pressurising and can require timely professional support	Knowing a decision-maker will be available to attend meetings and can act promptly	Having an accessible and understanding adult who can listen and respond on one's behalf

Meeting such needs clearly requires a model of leadership with capacity, authority, and professional understanding of how policy change is mediated. Such leadership cannot be relegated solely to the level of teacher posts of responsibility, as the scope and scale of both current and pending change is clearly beyond the capacity, availability, or authority-levels of staff on full teaching timetables to implement. The following table sets out this position:

**Table 3: Contrasting Capacities of In-school Leadership and Administrative Positions**

	<b>Deputy Principal</b>	<b>Post of Responsibility</b>	<b>Administrative Assistant</b>
<b>Seniority</b>	Highest level – part of the senior leadership team	Middle leadership	No aligned seniority
<b>Decision-making power (e.g., resourcing)</b>	Capacity to make spending and other resourcing decisions	Limited authority to make resourcing decisions	Does not have the necessary education knowledge to adjudicate on competing resourcing demands
<b>Staffing authority (e.g., deployment, freeing-up, team creation)</b>	Has delegated authority from BOM and principal to deploy staff	No authority to question staff practice or to deal with staffing issues	No authority to make staffing decisions
<b>Access and reporting to Principal and BOM</b>	Daily ongoing liaison with the principal and may report to the BOM	Principal and BOM determine roles following consultation	Delegated tasks and reporting duties
<b>Daily, weekly time availability</b>	Optimal availability	No time for duties	Available to Principal and BOM, not school community
<b>Annual time availability (i.e., June and August)</b>	Available	Not available	Availability in line with terms of contract
<b>Management body support access</b>	Has access to advice, updates, support, and professional learning	No access	No access
<b>Agency</b>	Senior leadership and management position with highest level capacity to respond to the needs of parents, students, and teachers	Middle leadership position with bounded functionality	Task centred
<b>Professional learning</b>	Undergoes specific leadership professional learning – has time and capacity to specialise	Training optional and with a specific functional focus	No training relevant to education policy implementation

In light of contemporary policy complexity and the demand for dynamic leadership and management approaches, JMB considers the Department should give consideration to the emergence of more clearly defined reporting lines and a tiered leadership structure for teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders, with senior leaders providing sustained strategic leadership and oversight of middle leadership in support of school improvement. We accept that this proposal would have implications for workforce planning, requiring the involvement of the Department’s workforce planning function and the Inspectorate. Nonetheless, JMB would be willing to support cross-pillar discussions involving the workforce planning pillar and the Inspectorate to explore this possibility collaboratively.

The audience for this Pre-Budget Submission is wider in scope than the Department itself, as current threats to foreign direct investment will be best met by having an optimally educated, and enterprising workforce. Government as a whole, and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in particular, carry the responsibility for fiscal rectitude. We contend, however, that the resources of the State should also be disbursed responsibly to the benefit of our citizens alive today and that education spending be increased in proportion to the increased levels of demand placed upon it. Otherwise, the opening statement of the Programme for Government’s Education section remains empty rhetoric:

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*Education is at the heart of all of our ambitions as a country. Excellent and innovative education and training are essential to delivering a fair society and a strong economy.*

*This Government will:*

- › *Deliver a learning experience for students to highest international standards.*
- › *Use education to break down barriers for groups at risk of exclusion.*
- › *Equip learners of all ages and abilities to participate and succeed in a changing world.*
- › *Support Ireland to be a leader across a broad range of fields, including scientific, cultural, enterprise and public service.*
- › *Support students and all those who work in the education sector.*

In terms of cost effectiveness, leading and managing change around senior cycle, inclusive and special education, and the raft of new guidelines and commitments will demand the establishment of in-school teams, their resourcing, their timetabling, their connection with the wider school community and meeting their professional learning needs, all of which require systems-level capacity.

To reiterate, we are not seeking to attach specific responsibility for curriculum and/or inclusion to one or more deputy principals, as these policy demands can only be met on a school-wide basis. We are seeking enhanced capacity at senior leadership level to lead, collaborate, and support this evolving work and to meet the needs of the subject departments, inclusion teams, and individuals required to implement such significant change.

It must also be emphasised that basing a school's senior leadership allocation on student numbers does not comprehend number of staff the principal has to manage. In addition to its core PTR-linked staff allocation, one of our schools (and this is not unique) employs 20 SET teachers, 5 Special Class teachers and 37 SNAs – representing an extra 62 people to manage.

Building on the small additionality secured in budget 2026, and as a very modest first step in the direction of acknowledging that senior leadership is centrally important in the achievement of good educational outcomes and thriving school communities, the following principles must underpin future deputy principal allocation ratios:

- › The DP to student ratio in larger schools currently allocates one deputy principal to 300 students
- › Smaller and medium-sized schools should have an equitable allocation, and maintain the same ratio of 1:300

Exceptions to the 1:300 ratio should include:

- › Schools in the DEIS programme at the enrolment category 500 to 599, which require two deputy principals and schools in the DEIS programme at the enrolment category 700 to 899, which require three deputy principals.
- › All schools at enrolment category 150-299 to increase from 0.5 to 1.0 deputy principal posts

The following tables set out the agreed position on the provision of a fit-for-purpose deputy principal allocation across the complete range of post primary schools:

**Table 4: Current Deputy Principal Allocation**Enrolment Data is anchored on the census date of 30th September 2025 -published on <https://www.gov.ie>

Pupil Enrolment Categories (Including PLC)	Current Deputy Principal Allocation per enrolment Category (WTEs)		Total No of Schools in each enrolment category (source: gov.ie Enrolment Data September 30th 2025)		Current Total No of Approved Deputy Principal Posts in each enrolment category	
	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS
1-150	0.25	0.25	12	11	3	2.75
151-300	0.50	0.50	44	51	22	25.5
301-400	0.75	0.75	50	43	37.5	32.25
401-499	1	1	46	31	46	31
500-599	1	1	58	23	58	23
600-699	1	2	56	28	56	56
700-799	1	2	80	14	80	28
800-899	2	2	38	13	76	26
900-1199	3	3	93	16	279	48
1200-1499	3	3	11	2	33	6
1500+	3	3	1	0	3	3
<b>Totals</b>			489	232	693.5	281.5
		<b>Total Schools</b>	721			

**Table 5: Proposed Deputy Principal Allocation**Enrolment Data is anchored on the census date of 30th September 2025 -published on <https://www.gov.ie>

Pupil Enrolment Categories (Including PLC)	Proposed Allocation Deputy Principals per School in Each Enrolment Category		Net Allocation Increase over Existing in Deputy Principals per School in each Enrolment Category		Requested Net Increase Expressed as No of DPs Per Enrolment Category		Total No Deputy Principals (Current Allocation +Increase) per Enrolment Category		Total No of Schools with Increased Allocation in Each Enrolment Category	
	Non Deis	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS
1-150	0.5	0.5	0.25	0.25	3	2.75	6	5.5	12	11
151-300	1	1	0.5	0.5	22	25.5	44	51	44	51
301-400	1	1	0.25	0.25	12.5	10.75	50	43	50	43
401-499	1	1	0	0	0	0	46	31	0	0
500-599	1	2	0	1	0	23	58	46	0	23
600-699	2	2	1	0	56	0	112	56	56	0
700-899	2	3	0	1	0	27	236	81	0	27
900-1199	3	3	0	0	0	0	279	48	0	0
1200-1499	3	3	1	1	11	2	44	8	0	0
1500+	3	3	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	0
<b>Totals</b>					104.5	91			162	155

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## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › JMB strongly urges the Department to immediately provide for the allocation of additional deputy principal capacity under a ratio of 1:300 across the majority of post primary schools as a matter of priority
- › No school with an enrolment over 151 should be allocated a fraction of a deputy principal and schools within the DEIS programme require an enhanced deputy principal allocation
- › Basing a school's senior leadership allocation on student numbers does not comprehend the number of staff the principal has to manage, including increasing numbers of SET teachers, Special Class teachers and SNAs. The allocation model should therefore be reviewed and amended to reflect this reality
- › JMB considers that the Department should establish the current extent of administrative supports in schools before developing another layer of admin staffing at grade 5 and develop an evidence-based allocation model of administrative support for all schools
- › In light of evolving policy around inclusion, curriculum, child-protection, anti-bullying, and behaviour management, the required systems-level knowledge, delegated authority, year-round availability, and agency within schools can best be mediated by enhancing capacity at deputy principal level
- › JMB is seeking an independent review with a mandate to reimagine an appropriate leadership and management structure in schools to support quality education. Such a review will require to comprehend the principal's workload and responsibilities, their wellbeing and psychological health, professional preparation and development, support structures, step-down and exit-routes, and make recommendations for the remediation of a principal recruitment and retention crisis
- › JMB considers the Department should give consideration to the emergence of more clearly defined reporting lines and a tiered leadership structure for teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders, with senior leaders providing sustained strategic leadership and oversight of middle leadership in support of school improvement

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## Supporting Meaningful Curriculum Change

### Soundings

*This Government will:*

**Conduct a review of leadership and continuous professional development supports to ensure that school management structures are adequately equipped to manage changes to the education system.**

Programme for Government, 2025

**'There is a misalignment between the junior cycle and senior cycle, with many interviewees calling for the types of learning experienced at junior cycle to be followed through to senior cycle'**

'Embracing Diversity in all its Forms': The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education (ESRI, 2024)

**By any standard, the response of the DE, successive ministers, and the Teaching Council to the growing teacher supply crisis has been inadequate ... the DE might be 'playing for time' and waiting for the changing demographics to address the problem**<sup>13</sup>

Prof Judith Harford and Dr Brian Fleming, UCD School of Education

## Senior Cycle Redevelopment

The education system is a social institution which should be expected to change along with other such institutions. Doing this appropriately in the context of senior cycle redevelopment requires that both system and schools respond to four key questions, under which we will frame this section:

1. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can the school provide to achieve these?
3. How can these experiences be effectively organised?
4. How can we determine if these purposes are being attained?<sup>14</sup>

### *What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?*

In 2022, the NCCA's Advisory Report on Senior Cycle framed what has become accepted as a shared perspective on what the educational experience at senior cycle should achieve:

- › Continue to educate the whole person
- › Help every student to become more enriched, engaged and competent, as they further develop their knowledge, skills, values and dispositions in an integrated way

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03323315.2023.2222709>

<sup>14</sup> 'The Curriculum – Theory and Practice' A.V. Kelly (2009)

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- › Serve collective as well as individual purposes in schools and other educational settings and in the wider society
  - › Help students to access diverse futures, by providing firm foundations for transition to further, adult and higher education, apprenticeships, traineeships and employment; and participation in civic society and adult life<sup>15</sup>

At the heart of this set of purposes lies the principle of ‘student at the centre’ and it is in this context that school leaders face an emerging set of challenges in terms of the resources required to achieve these outcomes in any meaningful way.

(a) Strategic Implementation:

- › Senior school leaders must develop structured plans to integrate teacher professional learning into school policies and daily practice
- › Allocating ring-fenced collaborative time for structured reflection on vision, senior cycle redevelopment requirements, and school improvement priorities

(b) Sustained Professional Development:

- › Externally provided professional learning, while valuable, must be complemented by sustained, school-led structures for coaching, mentoring, collaborative reflection and follow-up if it is to result in meaningful and lasting change in teaching and learning
- › Provide planned and protected opportunities for peer learning, professional dialogue and lesson study to support continuous engagement and reflection

(c) Cultural and Pedagogical Shift:

- › Foster a professional culture where teachers are supported to innovate, evaluate impact and refine practice over time
- › Ensure that change is not compliance-driven but rather rooted in shared values and a commitment to student learning

(d) Avoiding Superficial Change:

- › Ensure that reforms are not just box-ticking exercises but deeply embedded into classroom practice
- › Monitor and evaluate the impact of new approaches, informed by student outcomes and teacher feedback emerging from their professional collaborative practice as key indicators

(e) Leadership Modelling and Support:

- › School leaders must actively participate in professional learning, demonstrating commitment to change
- › Provide clear guidance on how professional learning transacts in ways that are consistent, coherent and developmentally appropriate to teacher capacity for change

(f) Resource Allocation:

- › Crucially, schools must be resourced with sufficient staffing capacity and protected collaborative time for teachers, supported by appropriate structures, to ensure that professional learning and reflection can occur without encroaching on student tuition time

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<sup>15</sup> <https://ncca.ie/en/resources/senior-cycle-review-advisory-report/>

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- › Such professional learning must be embedded within school structures, timetables, and development planning, rather than treated as an add-on to already stretched workloads

By taking these steps, school leaders can lead meaningful change rather than allowing redevelopment of their senior cycle provision to become a transactional process with little lasting impact.

Critically, senior school leaders must engage in *actively leading, structuring and sustaining* collaborative professional learning and reflective practice across the school. This cannot be achieved through *ad-hoc* initiatives or isolated training events, but instead requires deliberate planning, protected time, and the availability, authority and agency of senior leadership teams to lead, support and evaluate this work through school self-evaluation and school improvement processes.

In light of such demands, the capacity for overwhelm at system and human levels are obvious, and the JMB once again reiterates its call for significant enhancement of senior leadership capacity in order to mitigate such an avoidable outcome and to be available to parents as they accompany their children on this high-stakes journey.

### ***What educational experiences can the school provide to achieve these?***

By and large, senior cycle redevelopment has emerged as an educationally conservative process. Subjects are being reviewed and updated but still maintained in their current form. Programme paths, such as LCA and LCVP (now called ‘Leaving Certificate Life, Community and Work’) have had programme statement changes but nonetheless remain in place as discreet pathways. Transition Year has been reframed and access broadened while retaining its unique character. In short, a time travelling student from any point in the Leaving Certificate’s one-hundred-year history, would find wonderful changes to both content and methodologies, but nonetheless discover they could navigate the timetable in the same way they could before.

The challenge of bringing internal coherence to the experience of each individual student’s pathway therefore will require a system-wide exploration of ‘pathways’ and a school-wide exploration of how more agile structures can allow for such individuation. Questions that might be addressed include:

- › What scope exists for students to select combinations of subjects with modules, and what might modules look like?
- › Will all components need to be externally assessed by the SEC in perpetuity?
- › Can further cross-linkage and student mobility be established across the three current Leaving Certificate pathways?
- › To what extent can the siloing of L2LP programmes be reframed to allow for access to a wider range of student experiences?
- › To what extent can the more creative and engaging learning experiences of TY be integrated across the final three years of post-primary education?
- › Under what circumstances could the backwash effect of the points race be addressed in an effort to maximise the experience and outcomes of senior cycle for all students?

The increased flexibility, programme access, and subject range currently available to schools already offers significant pathway individuation but, as ever, meaningful and appropriate participation in these routes and options demands both senior leadership capacity to create the curricular conditions and adequate guidance provision to ensure students are supported in their decision-making. Neither are currently adequately provided for in terms of allocation.

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### ***How can these experiences be effectively organised?***

A helpful working definition of curriculum is as follows:

‘Curriculum is the totality of experience the student has as a result of the provisions made. Equating curriculum with syllabus reduces it to content or lists. The syllabus is the planned curriculum – the received curriculum is the reality of the student’s experience’<sup>16</sup>

Thus, what is central here is that the school should plan its curriculum as a whole, not just subject by subject, but therein lies an impossible proposition for schools from 2027 onwards when senior cycle SPHE becomes compulsory: the curriculum requirements exceed the 28-hour school week. JMB is seeking clarity from the Department and its Inspectorate on how this difficulty can be resolved, especially as schools within the voluntary sector will continue to make provision for religious education.

Scheduling aside, other factors continue to impact on the organisation and delivery of curriculum components:

Chief among the challenges for the delivery of school-wide SPHE senior cycle is the need to establish a new degree of confidence amongst teachers of this subject in the face of a shifting and dynamic background of social developments impacting on the lives of young people. Only a small minority of potential teachers have had relevant professional development in this area, so we need high calibre professional learning opportunities for significantly more teachers, current and potential. Schools also need policy level guidance on managing an increasing number of withdrawals from the subject by parents and by students over 18 years (an increasing cohort) due to examination pressures, as well as a revised set of guidelines and templates to support schools in reviewing and updating their RSE policies. Finally, every school will require a level of SPHE coordination time in which teachers and senior leaders can plan for, and monitor, SPHE implementation across the school.

In terms of restructuring their school’s Transition Year Programme, principals have consistently identified Programme Coordination as a key limiting factor. The current model of programme coordinator post of responsibility no longer meets the demands of significantly expanding access to Community, Life and Work Studies and programme flexibility within LCA in relation to Maths and MFL.

Notwithstanding the intrinsic value of introducing L2LPs at senior cycle, the key backing conditions required to ensure success and appropriateness will include school level autonomy and flexibility, ring-fenced planning and coordination time, specialised external professional advice, and appropriate and ongoing professional learning for the teachers, leaders and special needs assistants concerned.

Critically, the integration of students following L2LPs into some mainstream classes will be complex and require absolute policy clarity, teacher cooperation and appropriate levels of leadership to enact appropriately.

### ***How can we determine if these purposes are being attained?***

School Self-Evaluation as a process is now reaching both system and school-level maturity and represents the most effective model of improvement in terms of enhancing student experience and outcomes. That said, the range and frequency of external evaluations continue to expand. During 2024 for example, inspectors carried out 529 evaluations in post primary settings, with 380 announced and 149 unannounced inspections, and inspectors observed a total of 3,045 lessons during these evaluations.

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<sup>16</sup> ‘The Curriculum – Theory and Practice’ A.V. Kelly (2009)

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The findings of such evaluations, however, continue to be encouraging:

- › The quality of teaching was found to be good or better in 88.2% of the lessons observed during announced inspections. The quality of learning was found to be good or better in 87.6% of the lessons. Assessment was found to be good or better in 83.6% of lessons.
- › The quality of teaching was found to be good or better in 91.3% of the 520 lessons observed during 149 incidental inspections in 2024. The quality of learning was good or better in 90.8% of lessons. Assessment was found to be good or better in 85.6% of lessons.

The Inspectorate concludes that *'overall, the findings indicate that most schools and classrooms demonstrated good or better practice'*<sup>17</sup>.

At school level, the maintenance of high standards of teaching, learning, assessment, and reporting is not being taken for granted by our school leaders. The JMB call for enhanced capacity at senior leadership level represents an absolute keystone in terms of meeting the challenges of current and pending curricular reform. At the heart of this enterprise is the fact that curricular redevelopment and reform can only work when teachers understand, accept and then become committed to the underlying principles behind the changes. School leaders will therefore need to convince teachers of the importance of developing a theoretical underpinning to their work, bridging the gap between theory and practice and to achieve this, principals and deputies require the professional latitude to effectively and meaningfully enact their leadership for learning mandate.

## The Junior Cycle Framework

As the school system continues to mediate an accelerated redevelopment of senior cycle, there has been little evidence of a system level response to the findings of the longitudinal study carried out by the University of Limerick into the impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle. Key outcomes from the research point to challenges which will require to be addressed, if only to avoid repeating such trends as senior cycle redevelopment continues:

- › There still remains a strong focus on terminal examinations at junior cycle and they are of primary concern to most teachers
- › The extent to which students engage in more active creative learning is an area where there is little evidence of signs of change – an outcome aligning with a finding in the ESRI Report of 2024: 'When it comes to teaching and learning experiences, a strong emphasis on more traditional, teacher-centred teaching methods emerged. While most students felt that their teachers explained things well, they also shared that they had limited opportunities for active learning'
- › The way the CBAs were realised in the curriculum appears to have inhibited the attempts to establish a dual approach to assessment, as they were mainly seen as activities that were bolted on to existing requirements rather than alternative aspects of assessment
- › The absence of the necessary structural changes to assessment inhibited teachers and students from experiencing the framework as it was originally intended
- › It should not be concluded that the intended changes do not work, as the necessary conditions for enactment were not fully realised

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/campaigns/the-department-of-education-and-youth-inspectorate-report-2024-and-thematic-review/>

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Furthermore, in relation to CBAs, the 2024 ESRI report on the voluntary secondary sector reported:

*'Weaknesses in the junior cycle framework have been highlighted in this study, particularly in terms of CBAs not being experienced as a positive learning experience and a mismatch between junior and senior cycle education'*

*'While students were deemed to learn from CBAs, it was noted that CBAs do not appear to have been experienced as intended, though teacher collaboration, professional conversations and the language which teachers have acquired to talk about learning appear to have developed since the introduction of the Framework'*

Thus, junior cycle assessment in general requires a system response, particularly as senior cycle developments accelerate and are profoundly connected to the experience from first to third year, and again, concerns emerging in the ESRI report include:

- › Teachers express concerns about the capacity of the Junior Cycle terminal assessment to allow students to demonstrate their learning and accurately measure it
- › Concerns are being raised about common-level papers, the removal of foundation level papers, and the consequent impact on accessibility of the curriculum and student confidence
- › The full realisation of the Framework for Junior Cycle is 'strait-jacketed' by existing modes of assessment not in line with the wider curriculum changes and a misalignment with the existing Senior Cycle and related Leaving Certificate examinations
- › Many of the school principals interviewed believed that the lack of changes to Senior Cycle and final examinations was a significant impediment to the realisation of the Framework for Junior Cycle, hence the need for greater 'joined-up thinking'

In this context, the centrality of the apex school leader and senior leadership team in terms of curricular change is well affirmed in the literature. Indeed, management and administrative functions, while often burdensome, cannot be mediated in isolation from the vision and values underpinning leadership. The UL finding that *'curriculum coherence extends beyond the alignment of curriculum goals, enactment, and assessment, and needs to also consider the local school culture and context and the extent to which the curriculum changes align with the school's values and practices'* represents a clear association between leadership capacity and the establishment of a learning culture in the school. Such capacity challenges are at the heart of the JMB's reiteration of its call for enhancement measures in the form of additional deputy principal allocation across the sector.

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- › **An acceptance of the, now proven, relationship between school culture and the embedding of curricular change demands that the principal and senior leadership team – the chief culture creators – are developed, and supported in their role**
- › **The 2024 ESRI report and the findings of the UL final report of the impact of junior cycle reform should be carefully considered by the Department and Minister, with policy and resourcing adjustments made in light of its findings**
- › **In this context, the evident incoherence between curricular intentions and the cultural change in learning, teaching, and assessment practices at junior cycle require immediate attention and resourcing**
- › **The Department should expand the provision of high-quality professional learning and post-graduate development opportunities for teachers in SPHE and in RSE**
- › **As senior cycle developments accelerate and are profoundly connected to the experience from first to third year, junior cycle assessment in general requires a system-level response in light of the impact study findings**

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## Teacher Supply – A Multifaceted Challenge

Everyone with a stake in the education enterprise has work to do around the urgent need to develop and recruit appropriately qualified teachers to the profession and to create the working conditions under which they will want to stay. Since educators of all kinds are central to the flourishing of a democratic and inclusive civic society, that society itself must act and communicate in ways that recognise the great national asset we have in our values-driven teacher workforce, and affirm the profession in our discourse:

- › What do we say, and how is it heard, when we educators speak to civic society about teaching as a profession?
- › What do we reveal of ourselves at our annual conferences?
- › What do we write in the newspapers?
- › What is our bearing and demeanour in our day-to-day work with young people?
- › What pride do we display in our work and achievements?
- › What do we do to bring in potential educators from society's margins?

These questions leave us with a responsibility to generate a narrative around teaching and leading that create something of a magnetic draw to the profession and to inspire young and not-so-young to consider teaching as a career. The challenge is equally to maintain and raise the profession's standing within the wider community and to have 'the village' want to raise its own teachers.

In terms of more immediate actions, JMB strongly supports the Department, the Teaching Council, and other relevant agencies in addressing teacher supply challenges from as many approaches as possible. We urge the Minister and her officials to maintain a level of urgency and agency around this crisis as demographic trends alone will not provide any solutions. During 2024 for example, the number of students enrolled in post primary schools reached an all-time high. Total enrolments in September 2024 were 425,412, representing an increase of 8,781 students, or 2%, from September 2023 (416,631).

We actively promote school management cooperation with data-gathering such as the substitute teacher survey and the annual survey of unmet teacher and subject need, which the JMB initiated five years previously for our sector. The extremely high response rates from busy principals enable evidence-informed, well-grounded, and system-sensitive measures to be taken at other levels of intervention and the JMB represents post primary management on the Department's Data Working Group.

High quality, live data will continue to act as the bedrock of all planning and policy directions in terms of teacher supply, but there are anxieties around the current calibre of such information:

*'The nucleus of any policy response to the teacher supply crisis is accurate, up-to-date data which informs a teacher supply and demand model. While shortages of teachers in particular subject areas have arisen from time to time, for ten years or so now school principals in Ireland have been highlighting the fact that the problem has both widened and deepened. Sophisticated data on the scale of the problem continues to elude, however, rendering an appropriately comprehensive response impossible'<sup>18</sup>.*

Prof Judith Harford and Dr Brian Fleming UCD School of Education

Diversifying the teaching profession from its long-standing demographic homogeneity represents both a moral and pragmatic enterprise. JMB is developing resources to raise awareness of the potential of broader recruitment approaches as well as interrogating areas of unconscious bias across employers.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03323315.2023.2222709>

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We would like to see more timely registration of teachers from the North of Ireland and from further afield and acknowledge that the Teaching Council has made significant progress in this area. Schools are nonetheless reporting delays in international police vetting and this is an area that would benefit from further investigation. It would also make sense for Ireland to establish teaching as a priority profession in terms of visa entry to the state and permission to work. In this respect, we have much to learn from Australia which currently does so and is attracting many of our own teaching graduates as a result.

Within the existing teaching workforce, a much-accelerated expansion of upskilling programmes is required, along with an expansion in the number of places in current programmes. There is increasing clarity that challenges extend beyond unfilled gaps in current subject areas to include a wider, government-wide emphasis on priority policy areas such as STEM education, the Arts, Irish-medium provision, and special educational needs. While we acknowledge the progress made so far, the provision of funded post-graduate upskilling modules and programmes in these areas must become more of a priority.

Of course, pipeline factors will always remain a challenge and a key bottleneck in the throughput of initial teachers lies in the two-year post-graduate model of teacher education. This two-year PME requirement emerged following an adverse PISA outcome in 2009 and has never been subsequently reviewed or audited in terms of effectiveness.

JMB is thus proposing an independent review of the current PME model. Whether or not such an evaluation leads to a return to a one-year post-graduate model of ITE, we need to determine the scope for a more fit-for-purpose placement, or 'apprenticeship' model in terms of depth, rather than breadth, of in-school experience in the programme's second year, as well as cost mitigation by remunerating student teachers on placement as in nursing and other professional development programmes.

Finally, the high cost and low availability of appropriate housing and other accommodation for teachers, nurses, and other vital public service workers is no longer a solely urban problem. Given its intractability and country-wide impact, JMB urges the Minister to raise the issue of subsidised accommodation for teachers at government level and to explore strategies and investment opportunities under which such workers may be prioritised.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- › **The PME programme costs between €6,000 and €8,500 per year for EU students, with total two-year costs typically ranging from €12,000 to over €16,000, making a teaching career inaccessible to a range of social groups**
- › **The two-year PME programme must therefore be independently reviewed and reconfigured to provide for a deeper single-school embedded experience, under a paid placement model as is the case with other professional development pathways such as nursing and across the wider private sector**
- › **Strategic and binding proposals to address the issue of inadequate teacher supply must emerge from the national conversation on this issue – self regulation by ITE providers and granular qualification recognition criteria for teacher registration must be addressed as part of this process**
- › **Experiential, and in particular, teacher wellbeing factors, must be comprehended in mitigating supply, retention, and attrition challenges in the workforce**
- › **Data on teacher wellbeing should be gathered in the next round of OECD PISA testing**

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## Goal 2: Support students and all those who work in the education sector

### Objectives

- › Continue to improve teacher professional development to ensure teachers and school leaders are fully supported to deliver a worldclass education system
- › Continue to make policy decisions which produce the best educational outcomes for children and young people and which are fiscally sustainable
- › Provide appropriate, accessible and timely support and services to our stakeholders and school communities

### Fit for Purpose Staffing Allocations

#### Soundings

At lower secondary level, the student-teacher ratio is about 13 students per teacher on average across OECD countries. It varies widely, from fewer than 9 students per teacher in countries like Croatia, Greece, and Norway to more than 30 students per teacher in Mexico. At upper secondary level, the student-teacher ratio is also about 13 students per teacher on average<sup>19</sup>.

Education at a Glance (OECD, 2025)

It is vital that every student is supported to reach their full potential, and that our education system is fully inclusive of every student. We will continue to build the capacity of the education sector to provide better services for young people and provide specialist services to those young people who need it.

Programme for Government 2025

'The study has highlighted variations in the perceived adequacy of supports and facilities across the school sectors, with non-fee-charging voluntary schools faring much less well'

ESRI Report (2024)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/09/education-at-a-glance-2025\\_c58fc9ae/full-report/how-do-student-teacher-ratios-and-class-sizes-vary-across-education-levels-up-to-upper-secondary-education\\_76b87b21.html?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/09/education-at-a-glance-2025_c58fc9ae/full-report/how-do-student-teacher-ratios-and-class-sizes-vary-across-education-levels-up-to-upper-secondary-education_76b87b21.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>20</sup> 'Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI

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## ***Class Size and the Pupil-Teacher-Ratio***

The government's stated policy of working towards a situation in which every child and young person, including those with profound and enduring challenges, can be educated in their local community is, of course, one to which all citizens will agree and aspire. The dramatic growth in special class provision in mainstream post primary schools is bringing about its own reconceptualisation of inclusion at school level. This model, though potentially siloing for young people diagnosed as requiring such a setting, is being adapted by schools to ensure no student remains 'parked' in their special class forever.

Thus, students facing significant learning and behavioural challenges are increasingly attending and participating in 'mainstream' subject classes, bringing with it new levels of responsibility for class teachers and school leaders. 'Teaching to the middle' is no longer an option for educators and every student has the right to receive a level of teaching, learning, assessment, and reporting, appropriate to their needs. Such growing levels of differentiation, including the integration of students following L2LP curricula, cannot be achieved in classes of up to 30 students. A Red C poll of secondary school teachers concluded *'The majority of teachers state that large classes have a negative impact on teaching and learning and on the disciplinary climate in the classroom. At least 4 in 5 teachers feel that class size inhibits range of teaching strategies used and opportunities for students to engage in group and other collaborative work'*.<sup>21</sup>

Equally pressing on school communities, particularly those in the small to mid-range of enrolment, is the struggle to retain and maintain a broadly based curriculum in the face of a teacher supply crisis and an increasingly diversified set of subjects and subject specifications. The added pressures being brought about by a need to have oversight of Additional Assessment Components while also mitigating the influence of AI on integrity, means teachers will require to dedicate their attention to yet another new individuation task – an impossible proposition in a class of up to 30, essentially adult, learners.

These trends are also recognised by the OECD in the Education at a Glance report of 2025<sup>22</sup>:

*Over the past decade, many education systems have been influenced by two concurrent trends: a decline in the school-age population and an increasing teacher shortage. While these dynamics may seem to offset each other – fewer students could imply reduced pressure on staffing – the reality is more complex. Many systems struggle to recruit and retain qualified teachers, particularly in rural areas or for specific subjects, limiting their flexibility to adjust class sizes. At the same time, budgetary constraints and rigid staffing formulas further complicate matters. Moreover, despite falling enrolment in many systems, growing expectations for inclusive education, personalised learning, and student well-being continue to increase demand for teaching personnel.*

The oft-cited demographic dividend wherein a falling pupil and student population in Ireland will both solve the teacher supply crisis and allow for smaller classes thus represents linear thinking in the face of a complex and dynamic reality – particularly at post primary. What is required, along with pipeline factors at ITE level, is a fit-for-purpose student teacher ratio at post primary, unlocking many of the pressures faced both by school leaders and classroom teachers themselves.

The Programme for Government indicates that the State will *'Aim to reduce the general Pupil Teacher Ratio at primary level to 19:1 over the term of government and introduce targeted measures in schools with very large classes'*.

While such investment at primary level is long overdue, the stark absence of any reference to equivalent treatment at post-primary level is hugely concerning. In particular, current policy change at senior cycle,

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21 <https://www.asti.ie/news-campaigns/campaigns/class-size/>

22 [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/09/education-at-a-glance-2025\\_c58fc9ae/full-report/how-do-student-teacher-ratios-and-class-sizes-vary-across-education-levels-up-to-upper-secondary-education\\_76b87b21.html?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/09/education-at-a-glance-2025_c58fc9ae/full-report/how-do-student-teacher-ratios-and-class-sizes-vary-across-education-levels-up-to-upper-secondary-education_76b87b21.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

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for example in relation to broadening participation in Transition Year and the new LCVP, roll-out of L1 and L2 senior cycle programmes, and enhanced flexibility for LCA students, will all carry significant implications for staffing levels if they are to succeed. Indeed, the NCCA has now begun consultation with schools and other stakeholders around pathway flexibility for all students, a feature of senior cycle which absolutely cannot be realised under current teacher allocation levels.

Ireland already has a higher ratio of students to teaching staff at secondary level than the European average, higher compulsory instruction time per student per year, as well as significantly higher number of hours teaching time per year per teacher. Ireland nonetheless has one of the highest secondary school completion rates in the world at 89%, while the average school completion rate for OECD countries is 83%.

It should not be forgotten that the increase of the PTR to 19:1 coupled with the reduction in guidance counselling, EAL, and Traveller support hours from schools (an effective PTR increase), have had a very severe impact on the educational experience being offered in schools. The perception that increasing the PTR in any school by a point means an additional student in a classroom is completely wrong – it means subject and specialist teachers are lost to the school, and it is entirely unacceptable that our schools are still expected to operate under a PTR that has been in place since Budget 2009.

Meanwhile, the Irish State recognises and supports the right of parents to send their children to the school of their choice [Education Act 1998 Section 6 (e)]. The fee-charging school Pupil-Teacher Ratio has been increased three times in recent years. Fee-charging schools are a long-standing and successful example of Public-Private Partnership and are a net contributor to the economy. There is no such thing as ‘free’ education – either the State pays, or parents pay. Schools in the fee-charging sector, where parents pay much more, save the State money and no school is immune to demands of policy change at inclusion or curricular levels.

The pupil teacher ratio for schools in the Free Education sector must therefore be restored to 18:1 in order to alleviate the impact of demographic change at post primary and the impact of the cutbacks on staffing in schools in recent years and the pupil-teacher ratio in fee-charging schools should be reduced as a first step from 23:1 to 21:1

Meanwhile, the allocation for LCA should be increased from 0.5 to 1.0. In a school with 5th and 6th year LCA operating in distinct classes, the school receives just 11 hours additional allocation but must provide 56 hours of tuition.

### ***Deputy Principals’ Time for Leadership and Management Duties and PTR***

With the planned expansion of the curriculum, particularly at senior cycle, combined with an unacceptably high pupil-teacher ratio and ongoing teacher shortages, deputy principals are increasingly being pulled back into the classroom to cover teaching gaps and ensure subject continuity. Under current contractual arrangements as set out in Circular 04/98, deputy principals can be timetabled for teaching each week, significantly reducing the time available for their critical leadership, management, and administrative responsibilities.

In light of the arguments outlined throughout this pre-budget submission, the JMB strongly advocates for a review of Circular 04/98 to eliminate the teaching hours of deputy principals, both as an initial essential measure to improve the PTR and to enhance the capacity of senior leadership teams in schools.

To ensure schools are not disadvantaged by this change, the JMB requests that the permanent teacher allocation be increased by the number of hours eliminated as part of this review, as outlined below:

Current Teaching Hours for Deputy Principals (Circular 04/98)	
Number of Teachers in the School	Deputy Principal Maximum Teaching Hours
30 and over	8 hours
17-19	10 hours
Less than 17	15 hours

This measure directly addresses two critical challenges:

1. Freeing deputy principals from contractual teaching obligations, enabling them to fully engage in their leadership, management, and administrative duties, and,
2. Reducing the pupil-teacher ratio, ensuring the continued provision of senior cycle optional subjects

Without targeted action to address the post-primary PTR and the continued expectation that deputy principals are required to teach, schools will struggle with leadership capacity and the operational challenges posed by staffing shortages. This will ultimately undermine schools' ability to offer a broad range of senior cycle options and pathways, as envisaged in the redeveloped senior cycle, while also impacting the quality of education and overall school effectiveness. In summary, schools require:

- › A PTR of 18:1
- › The Deputy Principal teaching hours commitment removed and added back in to the staffing allocation, and,
- › Enhanced allocation to support LCA from 0.5 to 1.0

### State Paid Chaplains

The anomaly that schools in the Community and Comprehensive and ETB sectors are allocated state-funded chaplains and schools in the voluntary secondary sector are not, is yet another indicator of the differential staffing across the post-primary sectors. This submission sets out a strong case for pastoral and psychotherapeutic supports for students at a time of rising anxiety and mental health challenges across their generation. To illustrate how a chaplain could be a key part of the school's response to such challenges, this chaplaincy role description from a Community School points out not just what such an important resource a school chaplain can be, but what is lost when schools do not have one:

- › As a community school, we have a designated school chaplain whose role as a faith presence is to animate the school ethos whilst serving the needs of students, parents and staff members.
- › The Chaplain works closely with the leadership team of the school along with the families, communities and parishes of the students. They aim to know all the students within the school and over the course of the school year will meet students individually as necessary. The school chaplain works with all staff to establish and maintain a well-balanced school community. In all their work the chaplain aims to be available to everyone in the school community (students, staff, parents) and through their work develop open and trusting relationships.
- › The role of the School Chaplain is wide and varied, and can involve teaching religious education, meeting students on an individual basis, organising liturgies and prayers, facilitating fundraising, providing retreats for year groups and participating in activities that relate to the well-being and development of the school community. The chaplain also undertakes to visit students and their families when situations such as illness or bereavement arise.
- › They aim to create an awareness of spirituality within the school and provide opportunities for students to express and explore their spiritual identity through retreats, wellbeing days, liturgies and other religious and non-religious occasions.

- › The School Chaplain contributes to formal school occasions, such as assemblies, information evenings, parent teacher meetings, graduation and school liturgies.
- › The chaplain works as a member of the student support team and offers extra support or assistance to students when needed. This important work is a combined effort with the Principal, Deputy Principals, Guidance Counsellor, Year Heads, Home School Community Liaison teacher, School Completion Programme coordinator, Behaviour for Learning teacher and our Special Educational Needs department. The Student Support Team meets on a weekly basis to raise and discuss students deemed to be in need/at risk. Student support helps students in crisis by exploring and developing a range of coping strategies and interventions, in a thoughtful and caring way, deemed appropriate to the student's individual needs.
- › The chaplain has an office, a space that is open to all members of the school community to come and visit if needed. There is also a prayer room that provides a quiet, reflective space for all members of the school community. Everything done by the chaplain is mindful of the many traditions that exist in our school and aims to highlight the rich diversity present in our community.
- › As a student you will meet the chaplain in the classroom, at school assemblies, at whole school events such as the carol service, individually if needed, taking part in school activities and as a presence in the school on a daily basis.
- › As a parent you will meet the chaplain at information nights, parent teacher meetings, coffee mornings, facilitating the parents plus programme and at events in your community.

JMB urges the Minister and Department to engage with JMB on a plan to introduce state funded chaplains across our sector as an equity measure as currently, 220,000 of the country's post primary students are excluded for this essential resource.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **The pupil teacher ratio for schools in the Free Education sector must be progressively restored to 18:1 in order to alleviate the impact of the cutbacks on staffing in schools during the economic crash and to reduce class sizes to allow for authentic inclusion and differentiated teaching and assessment, as well as providing for the range of subjects envisaged in SCR and flexible learning pathways, while making provision for individualisation of AACs across all senior cycle subjects**
- › **The allocation for LCA should be increased from 0.5 to 1.0. In a school with 5th and 6th year LCA operating in distinct classes, the school receives just 11 hours additional allocation but must provide 56 hours of tuition**
- › **The JMB strongly advocates for a review of Circular 04/98 to eliminate the teaching hours of deputy principals, both as an initial essential measure to improve the PTR and to enhance the capacity of senior leadership teams in schools**
- › **Fee-charging schools, a long-standing and successful example of Public-Private Partnership, are a net contributor to the economy. The pupil-teacher ratio in these schools should be reduced as a first step from 23:1 to 21:1. Deputy principals should not be obliged to erode their leadership duties to make up for an inadequate subject teaching allocation**
- › **JMB urges the Minister and Department to engage with JMB on a plan to introduce state funded chaplains across our sector as an equity measure.**

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## Investment and Funding of Schools

### Soundings

**'SVP is urging the Government to take a holistic approach to tackling poverty – recognising that households are being hit simultaneously by rising energy, food and housing costs, while temporary cost-of-living supports have been withdrawn. Volunteers are meeting people who have never needed support before, including some who may have previously donated to the charity. The cost of staying warm and well is no longer just about electricity or gas. When food and housing costs rise at the same time, families have nowhere left to turn. Ireland should not be seeing rising poverty in a country with a growing economy. We need measures that deliver real, lasting protection for the most vulnerable'**<sup>23</sup>.

SVP President Teresa Ryan, 2026

**'Parents stated they wanted to see voluntary contributions abolished, mainly by making sure schools are fully funded so they would not need to rely on parents.'**<sup>24</sup>

The Real Cost of School, Barnardos, (2024)

**We are exceptionally reliant on the voluntary contribution – we wouldn't be able to continue without it. The cost of infrastructure, the fire alarm is prone to going off – the callout charge is €200. Costs have gone through the roof. Cleaning costs. Anything you buy now – the capitation just won't cover our needs. (Principal, non-DEIS school)**

ESRI Report (2024)<sup>25</sup>

Relativities around the Irish government's levels of expenditure on education continue to be a contested space. For example, the OECD's *Education at a Glance 2025* report points to significant underfunding when measured as a proportion of GDP.

*'A large part of the disparity in expenditure per student across OECD, partner and accession countries reflects differences in national income levels. When expenditure is measured as a share of GDP, cross-country differences tend to be smaller, ranging from 2.5% of GDP to 6.9%. In Ireland, education investment in primary to tertiary education stands at 2.8% of GDP, which is below the OECD average of 4.7% by this measure'*<sup>26</sup>.

Meanwhile, the Department of Education's position on Ireland's expenditure on secondary education is that it be determined as a proportion of Modified Gross National Income (GNI\*) and has thus moved close to the EU average of 1.8%.

Macro comparators aside, what really matters at school level is that bills can be paid, the teaching, learning and social environment can be enhanced, and that senior leadership and the Board of Management can

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<sup>23</sup> SVP reports record demand as Irish households struggle with rising energy and food costs – [The Irish Times](#)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.barnardos.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Barnardos-Back-to-School-2024-Full-Report.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> 'Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025\\_1a3543e2-en/ireland\\_1ed5ff68-en.html#section-d1e202](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025_1a3543e2-en/ireland_1ed5ff68-en.html#section-d1e202)

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lead policy-driven improvements in student experience and outcomes without having to spend their time and energies on fundraising and asking hard-pressed parents for contributions.

Ireland's comparatively highly educated workforce acts as the strongest buffer we have against threats to foreign direct investment and current global political and economic instability. We don't have oil, gas, minerals, metals, or a strong industrial base. Our single most valuable resource is our people, and the Programme for Government recognises this:

*Ireland has one of the strongest education systems in the world, as evidenced by our high rankings in all forms of student achievement. Our economy and society benefit hugely from the high-quality education that is available to all citizens, and we must always demonstrate greater ambition for our sector.*

The 2024 ESRI report on the voluntary secondary sector demonstrated extraordinarily high levels of value for money to the state and concluded:

*'Overall, international comparisons suggest relatively low levels of investment in education in Ireland, [yet] Ireland is ranked one of the highest-performing countries in Europe in terms of efficiency and effectiveness'*

The successes we have seen in our educational outcomes, progression rates, and international attainment rankings have been achieved as a result of state and school partnership. Inflating the policy demand while leaving investment static will only lead to diminishing outcomes, a loss of trust in the partnership approach, burnout and exhaustion at school leadership level, and superficial compliance without deep change.

The requirement for voluntary secondary schools to uniquely source approximately 30% of their day-to-day funding from their families and communities represents perhaps the longest-running failure of the state to treat its citizens equitably. Two separate ESRI reports, a decade apart, identify differential funding of post primary schools as directly impacting on the need to seek voluntary contributions from families:

*'In our interviews, education stakeholders and school personnel repeatedly raised concerns over the system of funding for the different school types, and perceived inequities therein. The study has highlighted variations in the perceived adequacy of supports and facilities across the school sectors, with non-fee-charging voluntary schools faring much less well'*

*'Embracing Diversity in All its Forms' The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education, ESRI (2024)*

*'It is clear that voluntary secondary schools receive a significantly lower proportion of funding from the state and, as a result, are more reliant on voluntary contributions from parents and on general fund-raising. This reliance on discretionary funding is seen to pose challenges given lower levels of resources among some families, especially those with children attending DEIS schools, and means that funding sources are vulnerable to future changes in family income. Sectoral differences are also evident in the expenditure of schools, with voluntary secondary schools more likely to be required to cover from the capitation grant items paid centrally in case of the other sectors and, in addition, need to engage in substantial fund-raising and request voluntary contributions from parents to fund the basic day-to-day running of the school.'*<sup>27</sup>

*'Governance and Funding of Voluntary Secondary Schools in Ireland'. (2013) Merike Darmody and Emer Smyth. ESRI*

The Minister and government must understand that voluntary secondary school communities are suffering due to long-standing, systemic underfunding and that the capacity of families to replace the monies denied by the state to this post-primary sector alone has now become seriously eroded. As energy

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<sup>27</sup> *'Governance and Funding of Voluntary Secondary Schools in Ireland'. (2013) Merike Darmody and Emer Smyth. ESRI*

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costs for families increase and general cost-of-living inflation stabilises at high levels, it is becoming increasingly difficult on every level, including moral, for schools to seek voluntary subscriptions from hard-pressed families to make up a deficit unnecessarily created by government in its unequal funding of schools by sector.

The Budget 2026 increase in the mainstream capitation grant from €386 per student for the 2025/26 school year to €406 from 2026/27 is welcome but is not keeping pace with the specific levels of inflation experienced by schools. These factors include continuing energy cost inflation and expanding demand for digital devices and services to keep pace with curricular and other policy requirements, to name but two.

The JMB therefore urges the immediate index-linking of all capitation grants to allow schools to effectively manage their finances. The fact that capitation can remain static for long periods, for example, remaining at €316 for the years 2020 – 2024 represents an avoidable structural problem increasing the pressures on fund raising and the need to seek voluntary parental payments.

Under a three-year policy which should readily be agreed at government level, the Minister could significantly reduce the need for schools in our sector to seek voluntary contributions from families, a measure which would alleviate the pressures on all concerned.

Equalisation of funding across all school communities and sectors must also become a government priority if the state's founding intention to 'cherish the children of the nation equally' is to have any real meaning. To support transparency, the Department should provide a clear breakdown of its funding to each sector and eliminate ambiguity in terms of comparative resourcing.

According to a patron body recent analysis of year-end accounts for their schools, approximately 55% of schools would have faced deficits if not for parental payments. The JMB believes this analysis is applicable across the entire sector. This reliance underscores the pressing need for a comprehensive approach to funding that ensures the stability and viability of voluntary secondary schools in the long term.

Adding to the findings of the aforementioned ESRI research<sup>28</sup>, recent data and conclusions from Grant Thornton<sup>29</sup>, Barnardos and St Vincent DePaul, provide ample evidence of the impact of an institutionalised, embedded funding deficit and the consequent struggle to keep the school operating by resorting to parental contributions:

*Many parents reported extreme financial difficulties in trying to pay for their children's education and specifically cited the expectations to pay the voluntary contribution charges. They shared stories of how they were struggling to make ends meet and how these struggles were compounded by the perceived necessity of paying the voluntary contribution charges. These difficulties can lead to parents having to make difficult choices between paying for their children's education and paying for other basic necessities such as food and housing. Parents reported experiencing food poverty, taking on new debts, and even forgoing paying bills in order to afford their children's education.<sup>30</sup>*

Even within the voluntary sector, there are differentials in terms of further, layered, inequity:

- › *'DEIS schools face a unique disadvantage as it is more difficult to gather the same level of financial resources from parents or community members to make up the shortfall'*

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28 'Governance and Funding of Voluntary Secondary Schools in Ireland'. (2013) Merike Darmody and Emer Smyth. ESRI

29 <https://www.svp.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Grant-Thornton-The-role-of-voluntary-contributions-in-post-primary-schools-in-Ireland-St.-Vincent-de-Paul-2023.pdf>

30 <https://www.svp.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Grant-Thornton-The-role-of-voluntary-contributions-in-post-primary-schools-in-Ireland-St.-Vincent-de-Paul-2023.pdf>

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- › *'One school said that the anti-social behaviour in their community had entered the school environment and they had to put mechanisms and funding in place to deal with these issues'*
  - › *'Another school in a rural setting talked about the age and dilapidation of their buildings and the growing costs for travel (to and from schools and for school trips) which has had a crippling effect on their funding thus needing to go to parents for voluntary contributions'*<sup>31</sup>

It is important at this point to recognise the position of Protestant schools in the context of those that charge fees. It is not by chance that many of the fee-charging schools in the state are managed by a Protestant denomination. Many of these are small schools that simply will not survive with further discriminatory treatment. Larger Protestant schools are often the result of school mergers that took place during the 1960s when a large-scale rationalisation of Protestant secondary school provision took place. This was to take account of the introduction of free education at that time, and to enable survival. The clear understanding reached at that time, and which was maintained until 2009, was that the state would support such schools that were in the voluntary sector with equal treatment by including them in the same grant allocation levels of those in the free scheme category. This was an explicit categorisation by the Department, welcomed by these minority Protestant secondary schools and was evidence of an inclusive Department mindset at the time, reflecting respect for difference and tolerance of those that did not conform to a centralised expectation of education provision.

In addition, a significant proportion of Protestant families, particularly those from rural Ireland, avail of the Secondary Education Committee Protestant Block Grant for which they must pass a very stringent means test. Such an approach supports a high level of social inclusion which is augmented by school administered 'hardship funds' and a series of church and education trust charities. The children who benefit from those supports, especially those in smaller rural schools, come from families unable to contribute anything extra and much in need of all the usual state supports for education costs.

JMB thus seeks to open a conversation with the Department around a revised funding model for minority faith schools with a view to establishing more equitable treatment of children from such families.

A commencement must now be made to address the inequitable funding of schools in the Voluntary Secondary sector by completing the Equalisation process already conceded<sup>32</sup> by government. The JMB would welcome an opportunity to engage with the Department of Education and Youth in developing a comprehensive approach to funding to analyse and address the adequacy of funding for the various school sizes, particularly for schools with smaller enrolments, and to ensure the stability and viability of voluntary secondary schools in the long term while also removing the undoubted pressure on parents.

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31 [https://www.svp.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Closing-the-Gap\\_-What-is-needed-to-end-Voluntary-Contributions\\_-Report-2023.pdf](https://www.svp.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Closing-the-Gap_-What-is-needed-to-end-Voluntary-Contributions_-Report-2023.pdf)

32 [School Funding – Tuesday, 7 Nov 2017 – Parliamentary Questions \(32nd Dáil\) – Houses of the Oireachtas](#)

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- › **All per-capita grant aid to schools must be both increased and inflation-proofed by being consumer price index-linked on an annual basis**
- › **A government-level commitment must be made to eliminating, over a three-year period, the need for schools to seek voluntary contributions from families by addressing the need for enhanced capitation in all our schools**
- › **Government must address the inequitable funding of schools in the Voluntary Secondary sector by completing the equalisation process**
- › **Schools in the fee-charging sector are generally grant-aided either 50% or 0% of the rest of the voluntary secondary sector in the free-scheme and this policy should be reviewed in light of the financial pressures on many minority faith schools**
- › **JMB wishes to see an end to the situation where economically disadvantaged students availing of the SEC block grant to access education in a school of their faith are further disadvantaged by not being comprehended by the book scheme**
- › **JMB seeks to open a conversation with the Department around a revised funding model for minority faith schools with a view to establishing more equitable treatment of children from such families**

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## Goal 3: Equip learners of all ages and abilities to participate and succeed in a changing world

### Objectives

- › Collaborate with other Government departments to improve transitions between educational levels and access to multiple education pathways and youth services
- › Enhance support for learners to make informed career choices
- › Enhance therapeutic and mental health and wellbeing supports available to schools through NEPS and the NCSE
- › Continue to implement the Digital Strategy for Schools to empower students to harness the opportunities of digital transformation by developing digital competence and digital literacy, enabling them to reach their potential and participate fully and safely as global citizens in a digital world

### Resourcing High Quality Guidance and Psychotherapy Services

#### Soundings

Trauma and ACEs affect many students who are not in the category of clinical levels of need to be engaged-with through CAMHS - they are at the preclinical level of need for supports. The need is for one-to-one supports, not the universal or selected prevention levels of Jigsaw. The Oireachtas Education Committee repeatedly recognises this, and your Department now also recognises the importance of this level for primary schools, including the hugely welcome DEIS extension for strand 1 of the national pilot. Yet it defies belief that your Department is not addressing this major level of need at secondary school level, a level of need that is not the 'small' issues mentioned by IGC, these are large issues and large levels of need.

Prof. Paul Downes, Professor of Psychology of Education, Director, Educational Disadvantage Centre, DCU

In 2025 the Online Child Exploitation Unit have identified and safeguarded a further 39 Irish Victims of Online Child Sexual Abuse. The online threat landscape targeting children is growing in both scale and sophistication, presenting unprecedented challenges for law enforcement. Risks now extend beyond traditional concerns such as online grooming, cyberbullying, and exposure to inappropriate content, encompassing more insidious forms of exploitation through social media and gaming platforms<sup>33</sup>.

An Garda Síochána, October 2025

#### *This Government will:*

Review the mental health and wellbeing pilots that are ongoing in primary and post-primary schools and expand them.

Programme for Government 2025

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/press-releases/2025/october/an-garda-siochana-ongoing-investigations-into-identification-and-safeguarding-victims-of-online-child-sexual-abuse-in-ireland.html>

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## ***A Fit-for-Purpose Allocation for Guidance Counselling***

The Programme for Government 2025 gives a clear commitment to the delivery of a high-standard guidance and counselling service for all students:

*'This Government will enhance guidance services in schools to ensure that all students have access to high-quality guidance'*

Such an ambition can clearly not be achieved while schools are still below the pre-financial crisis allocation of guidance and counselling hours.

Another commitment, set out in the government's *National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance: Strategic Action Plan (2024-2030)*<sup>34</sup>, appears to open a consideration of *how* the provision of time for guidance will be developed:

*'Consider the effectiveness of the guidance-allocation model in post primary schools with a view to strengthening the quality of guidance counselling services'*

Whatever the model of allocation, JMB continues to seek a meaningful increase in provision for guidance and counselling (which are distinct services) in the face of a generation of students with unprecedented needs in terms of an emerging crisis in terms of chronic student absenteeism leading to significant levels of learning and metacognitive skills loss; complex career-plan support needs; as well as the ongoing challenges of traumatised, frequently relocated, refugee children and a redeveloped senior cycle demanding significant guidance counselling in terms of expanded course choices and progression routes.

In addition, the continuing exclusion of fee-charging schools from a full guidance counselling allocation represents an unacceptable anomaly, as the challenges facing young people know no social or any other boundary.

Given that both of the government's commitments reference the 'quality' of the service, the emergence of an ambitious framework of 'whole-school guidance' as the Department's overarching policy in terms of delivery brings with it significant challenges in terms of the standards of service students will receive, and the additional demands placed on their teachers as set out in Circular 0001/2025<sup>35</sup>:

*'Whole School Guidance, (WSG), is the contemporary model for guidance in post-primary schools. WSG means that all school personnel (including but not limited to the guidance counsellors) have an important role and responsibility to support students with their personal, social, educational and career choices. The WSG programme is provided in order to meet the identified guidance needs of the school community (parents/guardians/carers and students). The WSG programme provides a range of activities and learning experiences, through one-to-one appointments, group work, classroom guidance, units of learning, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Each school should have a WSG plan in place, outlining a school's approach to WSG, and includes a detailed WSG programme'*

While the clarity of expectation is welcome, any fair reading of the guideline information note<sup>36</sup> attaching to Circular 0001/2025 will immediately surface questions around capacity issues, including:

- › The availability of qualified guidance counsellors for recruitment
- › Finding time for the necessary school-wide planning and implementation

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<sup>34</sup> <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/january-2025-progress-report-national-strategic-framework-for-lifelong-guidance-strate.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/abcf18c9-00012025-.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/information-note-00012024.pdf>

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- › The establishment of a WSG team to include members of senior management, school guidance counsellors and others
  - › Development and leadership of a Student Support Team
  - › Senior school leadership capacity to lead the WSG planning process
  - › The willingness and availability of teachers generally to engage in guidance programme delivery
  - › The professional development required for such delivery

The guidance and counselling needs of today's young people are quite different to those of previous generations given the contemporary challenges they face, and include:

- › damage to mental health due to adverse childhood experiences, trauma, and the enduring effects of the pandemic such as learning loss, chronic absenteeism, and demotivation
- › the impact of social media technologies on young people
- › the relentless pace of change
- › challenges to parental authority
- › the demise of community supports
- › the growing gulf between rich and poor
- › 'poly-crises' of climate change, war in Europe, and social cohesion breakdown
- › dramatic increases in cases of online bullying
- › growing threats such as online grooming and nudification of images

The social and emotional effects of such anxieties are reflected back into our schools through the absence rates, attitudes, and behaviours of students, and it must be accepted by policymakers that (a) leaving our schools with an unrestored allocation of guidance counselling time and (b) hoping that a WSG Plan will address these, represents neither a realistic nor an honest solution to this challenge.

Meanwhile our guidance counsellors are attempting to provide their other core services in the context of the pressures of the CAO system, exponentially expanded college choices, the drive to promote apprenticeships and other further education options, an ever-increasingly complex college entry system with the addition of various access schemes such as HEAR and DARE, RACE applications, scholarship programmes, study abroad, scholarship applications etc., and each with their own separate processes and deadlines.

Parallel to these challenges, one of the greatest difficulties facing school management in making provision for students' mental health support lies in the discontinuity across the health and education systems in terms of access, availability, tracking, and inter-agency communication. While each service, NEPS, CAMHS, Social Workers, Tusla, and the HSE, is working intensively to provide relevant and timely services, they suffer not only from capacity challenges and long waiting lists, but also to a lack of coherence of provision from a school's perspective.

JMB recommends that government initiates a high-level review of inter-agency cooperation, connectivity, and communication, and that ultimately a single point of contact be established to relevant, authorised, school personnel through which appropriate and immediate referrals may be made in support of students in need of mental health supports and interventions.

In terms of guidance counsellor supply challenges, we urge the Department to prioritise the training of new guidance counsellors, particularly in light of (a) the cost to individual teachers; (b) release for

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training, now more frequently only offered in school time, and (c) time for shadowing. We need a structure mirroring that provided for special education teachers, and which increases post-graduate opportunities to specialise in this much needed field.

The current Programme Recognition Framework<sup>37</sup> for guidance counsellors is now a decade old, and pre-dates many contemporary developments in both student and adult working life. JMB requests a review of current guidance counsellor qualifications recognition policy, and to determine whether there's scope for broadening/expediting this, given the ongoing recruitment crisis. As an immediate measure, the Department should collaborate with existing guidance counselling programme providers to offer extra-mural courses, broadening access and participation rates across the country.

### ***A Model for Psychotherapy Services to Schools***

The emergence of the new NCSE Educational Therapy Service (ETS) offering Occupational and Speech & Language Therapies to schools provides a perfect blueprint for the establishment of an equivalent service for school-based psychotherapy. The governance, model design, recruitment planning, and phased delivery roadmaps for the ETS have all been worked out and are currently undergoing an accelerated rollout.

The 'Way' thus exists – what is now required is the 'Will'.

In terms of the rationale for such an investment, school-based emotional Counsellors/Psychotherapists providing one-to-one supports for students are a routine feature of many education systems internationally. Ireland is radically out of step with many European countries who provide these services in schools. Already, by 2017, school-based emotional counselling is well established in 62 countries internationally, mandatory in 39 countries, with a further seven countries in the process of developing such services (McElvaney et al. 2017).

In terms of the needs to be met, a key focus for such a service would be to work on a one-to-one basis with young people experiencing trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) which carry serious consequences for socialisation, learning, and behaviour, particularly in the teenage years. Trauma and ACEs take many different forms:

- › Domestic violence
- › Substance abuse in the family
- › Emotional and/or physical neglect
- › Mental illness in the family
- › Loss of parent through divorce, death, or abandonment
- › Physical abuse
- › Emotional abuse
- › Incarcerated family member
- › Consistent poverty
- › Experience of suicide
- › Childhood homelessness
- › Bullying in school
- › Being placed in State Care

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37 <https://assets.gov.ie/25003/f6b754be708443469ae7d569da311a81.pdf#page=7>

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At present, children and young people who have experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences fall almost entirely outside any systematic, school-based provision, despite clear evidence of the scale and seriousness of this level of need.

Irish research indicates that almost one in five children in Ireland has experienced two or more adverse childhood experiences, highlighting that exposure to multiple forms of trauma is far from exceptional.<sup>38</sup> Evidence from longitudinal analysis of the Growing Up in Ireland study further demonstrates that children who experience multiple ACEs face a significantly elevated risk of adverse outcomes, including later mental-health difficulties and problematic substance use, underscoring the long-term educational and wellbeing implications of unmet trauma-related need.<sup>39</sup>

Responding at school level to such profound and complex needs requires a dedicated service in light of current provision gaps, where:

- › The need to meet the complexity of emotional needs is not addressed by NEPS or generic pre-packaged wellbeing programmes, as neither provide, or are suitable to provide, ongoing individual therapeutic supports for trauma and ACEs
- › The National Wellbeing in Schools Policy 2018 of a teacher as *'One good adult'* is no substitute for qualified emotional counsellors/therapists
- › NEPS cannot, and does not, provide sustained one-to-one emotional counselling support
- › Career Guidance Counsellors' remit and skillset are not for trauma and adverse childhood experience
- › Wellbeing programmes and 'trauma-informed schools' are at the universal level and are no substitute for one-to-one counselling in students for whom such intervention is indicated
- › A teacher can offer support as mental health promotion and stress prevention, but is not a therapist

In seeking such a service, we align with three Joint Oireachtas Education Committee Reports and their priority recommendations:

**2021: Covid Response**

*'Emotional counselling and therapeutic supports should be provided in all primary and secondary schools as an urgent priority'*

**2022: School Bullying**

*'... to provide specialist Emotional Counselling and Therapeutic Supports, on site, in all primary and secondary schools'*

**2023: Mental Health in Schools**

*'The Department of Education Pilot Programme of Counselling Supports for Primary Schools should include post primary schools. Given that children in poverty are at increased risk of mental health disorders, socio-demographic should be considered, and resource provision should be increased in DEIS schools as a preventative measure'*

An expectation at school or system-level that Guidance Counsellors can meet these needs is wholly inappropriate and the National Lifelong Guidance Framework 2024-2030 is welcome in that it offers a clear focus on the boundaries of the Guidance role. In doing so, however, it does not engage at all with

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38 Atkinson, M. et al. *Adverse Childhood Experiences, Stress and Children*, Association for Family Research and Counselling (AFRC), Ireland

39 *Growing Up in Ireland (GUI): Associations and mediating factors between adverse childhood experiences and substance use behaviours in early adulthood*

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the terrain of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, not even to treat the Guidance role as one of referral. While it refers to wellbeing and holistic needs of students, it does not engage with the terminology of mental health.

This is actually to be welcomed as it demarcates the domain of relevance of guidance which is not that of the specialist emotional counsellors/therapists that are urgently required in secondary schools, especially schools in the DEIS programme, but by no means confined to such schools.

Put simply, this National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance concentrates on the core mission of guidance work – and this work is not that of being specialist emotional counsellors/therapists in schools. This leaves the space open for these specialist supports to be embedded in schools as they are for clearly different strategic goals and objectives from that of Guidance work.

JMB is urging the Minister to translate the Programme for Government commitment to *'Review the mental health and wellbeing pilots that are ongoing in primary and post-primary schools and expand them'*, by expanding these vital specialist one-to-one supports, especially across schools within the DEIS programme, and also over time all schools nationally, for students experiencing trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- › **The JMB urges the Minister to expand into post-primary the scheme to deploy emotional counselling/psychotherapeutic supports in primary schools to address trauma, anxiety, and mental health difficulties of vulnerable children and young people**
- › **JMB seeks a meaningful increase in provision for guidance counselling in the face of a generation of students with unprecedented needs**
- › **JMB urges the Department to support the training of new guidance counsellors, particularly in light of (a) the cost to individual teachers and (b) substituted release for training, supervision, and work-shadowing**
- › **In implementing their anti-bullying policies as set out in the Bí Cineálta framework, schools' most pressing needs centre on time and expertise**
- › **The adverse treatment of fee-charging schools in terms of their reduced guidance and counselling allocation (based, as it is on a higher PTR), should be discontinued**

## ICT in Schools – New Challenges and Evolving Opportunities

### Soundings

The guidance is intended to enable AI, where it is deployed, to be used in a safe, ethical and appropriate manner. Like any other digital tool used in education, AI should enhance and not replace human led teaching and learning, with the teacher overseeing any output and acting as the final checkpoint given the potential for bias and misinformation<sup>40</sup>.

*Guidance on Artificial Intelligence in Schools* (DEY, October 2025)

A range of challenges were raised in relation to technology integration, including inadequate hardware, internet connectivity problems, and students' and teachers' varying levels of technology proficiency. In particular, levels of perceived adequacy of technical support staff were very low, with only 21 per cent of schools where this was perceived to be adequate.

*'Embracing Diversity in all its Forms': The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education* (ESRI, 2024)

Overall, digital tools can enhance engagement and personalise learning, but their effectiveness is not guaranteed and depends on strategic implementation. Teachers play a central role here, whilst this review also identifies risks such as digital distraction, equity issues, and cyberbullying that must be thoughtfully addressed for effective and safe digital learning environments<sup>41</sup>.

Key findings and integration strategies on the impact of digital technologies on students' learning: Results from a literature review (OECD, 2025)

### Adequacy of Funding

JMB very much welcomes the establishment of a standardised payment period for ICT grant funding which will now be incorporated into the annual grant payments calendar for schools. This provides clarity and certainty and will assist schools with their budget management and medium-term ICT investment strategies. The €35 million in ICT grant funding in 2026 under the *Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027* nonetheless represents a cut of €15m in 2025 and 2026 when compared to previous tranches, other than 2022/23:

Year	ICT Grant Funding
2021–2022	€50 million
2022–2023	€0m: Grant deferred
2023–2024	€50 million
2025	€35 million
2026	€35 million

Thus, while reliability of funding is welcome, its capacity to allow schools to meet policy expectation remains completely inadequate. A 500 student-school would receive just €17,110 under this schedule

<sup>40</sup> [https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/dee23cad/Guidance\\_on\\_Artificial\\_Intelligence\\_in\\_Schools\\_2025.pdf](https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/dee23cad/Guidance_on_Artificial_Intelligence_in_Schools_2025.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> [https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/429e3ad5/OECD\\_Education\\_Working\\_Papers\\_No.\\_336.pdf](https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/429e3ad5/OECD_Education_Working_Papers_No._336.pdf)

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and this to provide for a whole academic year's demand for hardware replacement and upgrading; reliable, school-wide Wi-Fi connectivity infrastructure; technical support; software licensing costs; specific curricular requirements in technological subjects; curricular integration across all subjects; an efficient and integrated school administration package; assistive technologies and digital poverty measures; student online safety strategies; teacher professional development time; school website hosting and parent communications media, and a range of other emerging digital and technological demands, cumulatively swallowing-up not just the reduced grant, but consequently eroding their school's capitation fund.

Of immediate concern is the new range of demands placed on schools and their ICT infrastructure around senior cycle assessment and digital artefact secure storage requirements. The risks to student achievement and progression in situations of low capacity are obvious and will require to be resourced immediately and implemented securely.

Meanwhile, the significantly higher demands placed on schools within the DEIS programme working to achieve some level of digital equity are addressed by the Department with an 'enhanced' grant of a mere €3.02 per student, i.e. €2,000 basic grant plus €30.20 per student in non-DEIS schools, and €33.22 per student in DEIS schools.

Finally, the Department's ongoing strategy of providing schools in the fee-charging sector with just 50% of the grant aid in 'free-scheme' schools continues to ignore not just the funding demands on schools of all types, but the specific challenges faced by minority faith schools serving geographically dispersed student populations and requiring boarding facilities and Block Grant support in order to educate their communities' young people.

### *Toward Digital Maturity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*

The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 offered the first coherent national framework aligning system level expectations and resourcing with the ultimate school-level goal of enhancing the experience and outcomes for contemporary students growing up as 'digital natives'. The current Strategy to 2027 set out three ambitious pillars, presenting challenges to system and schools alike:

#### **Pillar 1:**

This is about ensuring that digital technologies are embedded in teaching, learning and assessment. It focuses on how best teachers and school leaders can be supported, and addresses inclusion, school planning, digital skills and competences and the curriculum

#### **Pillar 2:**

This pillar focuses on the technology itself and broadband connectivity in schools and considers how to support schools in purchasing and maintaining digital devices and other technology purchased through procurement frameworks, and other possible solutions around the important area of technical support

#### **Pillar 3:**

This pillar looks at system alignment, online safety, new and emerging issues in the area of digital technologies in education, engagement with parents and the wider school community as well as with industry

Even as the current strategy was being drafted, its authors, and indeed those of us they consulted with, would not have anticipated the emergence of a Leaving Certificate curriculum with such deeply embedded digital content, Additional Assessment Components, each mediated, generated, and stored digitally, and, of course, the incredibly rapid emergence of Large Language Models of AI, trained on massive text

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datasets to understand, generate, summarise, and predict human language, thus allowing for content creation, and complex reasoning.

JMB has been both active and innovative in terms of awareness-raising around the opportunities and challenges of AI in education with, for example, internationally recognised keynote speakers addressing our Annual Conference in 2025 and subsequent work on the use of the AI Assessment Scale, seeing these experts work in collaboration with our principals throughout the 2025/26 year and providing training for teachers participating in project.

As AI continues to shape the future of education, it is important to strike a balance between its benefits and the potential risks, ensuring that it enhances the learning experience without compromising essential human interactions and skills development. Such evolution will require enhanced levels of digital, and indeed, ethical maturity, unforeseen in advance of its emergence and while the opportunities continue to reveal themselves, two significant areas of threat cannot be ignored.

Firstly, the virtual universal integration of AI capacity across all platforms, apps, and communication tools means significant and powerful capacity in terms of image generation now rest at the hands of every smart-phone user, tablet owner, and laptop operator – i.e., everyone, young and not-so-young. The scope for extreme forms of cyberbullying has now moved to new levels, with data from the Internet Watch Foundation<sup>42</sup> finding reports of AI-generated child sexual abuse material more than doubling recently, rising from 199 in 2024 to 426 in 2025. Internet Matters also published *The New Face of Digital Abuse*,<sup>43</sup> a report exploring the proliferation of nude deepfakes (AI-generated sexually explicit images or videos) and children’s experiences of them. The report highlighted several key issues surrounding nude deepfakes:

1. ‘Nudifying’ tools are widely available online, appearing in results of mainstream search engines, as well as being cheap and easy to use
2. The vast majority of nude deepfakes feature women and girls
3. 13% of children had already encountered a nude deepfake, creating fear and anxiety amongst children

While, inevitably, the vast majority of transgressions in such instances will occur outside the parameters of the school building and school week, their effects and our responsibilities to mitigate them, demand a set of actions which will require significant Department support, advice, and resourcing to implement:

- › Awareness-raising of the illegality (not to mention immorality) of the generation of such images and the consequences of becoming involved
- › Engagement with parents in terms of opening appropriate family-level conversations around this threat and maintaining close contact with the school as the entire community works to protect its young people
- › Sharing of links to relevant, authoritative sources of advice, support, and reporting
- › School and family level focus on prevention strategies
- › Updating, and communication of, the school’s Acceptable User Policy and Code of Behaviour
- › Reviewing the school’s website blocking capacity
- › Providing reassurance to students and encouraging open conversations around discomfort, and perceived or real threat

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42 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-law-to-tackle-ai-child-abuse-images-at-source-as-reports-more-than-double>

43 <https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/research/children-experiences-nude-deepfakes-research/>

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Secondly, though less worryingly but nonetheless of ethical and academic concern, remains the as yet unresolved threat to high-stakes assessment integrity in terms of Leaving Certificate AACs, in particular. Senior Cycle assessment must evolve to assess students' ability to critically evaluate and responsibly use AI-generated material, rather than attempting to prohibit its existence.

Facing up to this challenge will require:

1. An honest acknowledgement by the Department and government that generative AI presents a significant challenge to our current norms of teaching and assessment
2. Professional learning for teachers in using AI must be provided to enhance teaching, learning, and assessment, and to show their students how to use it ethically and to enhance their own learning
3. An auditing of senior cycle subject specifications to assess their vulnerability to GenAI in terms of summative assessment of their learning outcomes
4. Redesigns of both specifications and components where vulnerabilities are discovered
5. A fit-for-purpose programme of professional learning for teachers and leaders on the potential and the challenges of AI, with adequate time release for its delivery
6. Immediate consultation with the education partners on the optimal approaches to be taken on concerns around AI
7. The creation of a time-window to establish a professional discourse across the education system, allowing for adaptation, readjustment, and the discovery of creative solutions to a new reality

None of these requirements will be cost-free, but each is essential if we are to retain the hard-won rigour, respect, and calibre of both teaching and assessment outcomes across our post-primary system while learning to work creatively and more positively with this hugely significant development.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- › **JMB welcomes the establishment of a standardised payment period for ICT grant funding but the cut of €15m when compared to previous tranches highlights the overall inadequacy of the grant**
- › **The significantly higher demands placed on schools within the DEIS programme in terms of addressing digital poverty will not be met by an additional €3.02 per student**
- › **Grant aid must be restored for the purchasing, maintenance, and support of school administration packages, and all software licenses in use in schools**
- › **To underpin the three pillars of the Digital Strategy for Schools, adequate funding must provide for school-wide remote device purchase, up-to-date teacher professional learning in digitally supported teaching and assessment, on-site technical and administrative support, and enhanced Wi-Fi infrastructure**
- › **Adverse treatment of minority faith schools in the fee-charging sector, in which grants such as those for ICT are reduced by 50%, must be discontinued**
- › **Adequate support must be provided to educators in the face of AI threats to student safety**
- › **Clarity of expectation must be provided to educators to ensure the integrity of high-stakes examination outcomes**

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## Providing the Highest Quality STEM Education Experience

As the term of the current *STEM Education Policy Statement 2017–2026* draws to a close, JMB looks forward to engaging with the Department and education partners in the development of a realistic and implementable successor. The Policy Statement vision for STEM education is that:

*'Ireland will be internationally recognised as providing the highest quality STEM education experience for learners that nurtures curiosity, inquiry, problem-solving, creativity, ethical behaviour, confidence, and persistence, along with the excitement of collaborative innovation'*

While such aspirations are shared across all stakeholders in the education enterprise, the only STEM-specific provision in the Programme for Government is one to *'Encourage greater STEM uptake in further and higher education'* – a worthwhile aspiration but utterly dependent on an effective STEM ecology at post primary, of which there is absolutely no mention. The Department's STEM Education Policy Statement requires targeted investment if its ambitions are to be realised, particularly as its associated Action Plan is completely devoid of spending commitments. The four pillars of the plan require specific interventions and we set these out as follows:

### ***Pillar 1. Nurture learner engagement and participation***

Schools urgently require the immediate provision of:

- › laboratory assistants
- › dedicated time for teachers involved in co-curricular STEM projects with their students
- › annualised equipment replacement and software upgrading grants
- › appropriate laboratory-class space and storage areas, and,
- › dedicated time to coordinate STEM teaching and activities, including health and safety compliance

In addition, the provision of a fit-for-purpose guidance and counselling service is key to supporting learner engagement and participation, as well as career progression into STEM programmes and employment. Such guidance is particularly needed in support of improving the gender balance in senior cycle science and technology subject uptake, as well as supporting students with additional learning needs in accessing the entire curriculum.

The Department must recognise the importance of positive engagement with STEM learning and this requires the early identification of dispositions within young people and tapping into their enthusiasms. Such identification goes beyond the science classroom and requires a school-wide responsiveness to students' innate capacities and excitement in terms of enrichment activities. Yet again such a claim on teacher capacity demands senior school leadership support, advocacy, and enabling measures and acts as yet further evidence for the need to increase deputy principal capacity across our school system.

### ***Pillar 2. Enhance teacher and early years practitioner capacity***

Teacher capacity is absolutely rooted in levels of staffing allocation, and the PTR reduction JMB is seeking is aimed at preserving access to a wide range of subjects at senior cycle, not least STEM subjects which have smaller class size limits. Indeed, there is a strong case to be made for an additional staffing allocation in respect of the increasing numbers of students taking up STEM subjects.

The recent growth in the staffing and capacity of Oide represents an opportunity to develop and deliver a range of professional learning interventions which could inform educators about contemporary

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pedagogies and teaching methods, as well as updating teachers in the ever-changing fields of their STEM-related knowledge bases.

In all cases of TPL provision, recognition must be given to the high levels of professional development of our STEM educators, to capitalise on this resource by adopting a social, shared learning approach, to provide ring-fenced time and continuity of learning domains over years, and to offer Teaching Council-recognised out-of-field programmes which will help with current specialist teacher shortages in these areas. JMB recognises the current challenges to schools and system in terms of teacher supply. What is needed, nonetheless, is a planned approach to PTR reduction and to prioritising the supply of qualified STEM educators within this.

### ***Pillar 3. Support STEM education practice***

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping STEM occupations. While demand for STEM capability remains strong, AI is reducing the value of routine technical tasks and increasing demand for higher-order skills such as problem formulation, judgement, ethical reasoning and interdisciplinary application.

STEM curricula must move beyond a narrow focus on procedural knowledge and technical fluency, and place greater emphasis on:

- › problem formulation and systems thinking
- › interpretation and evaluation of data and outputs generated by digital tools, including AI
- › ethical reasoning and responsible use of technology
- › application of STEM knowledge in complex, real-world and interdisciplinary contexts

Failure to rebalance curricula risks preparing students for forms of work that are increasingly automated, rather than for the evolving demands of the labour market and society.

Meanwhile, the reasons underpinning the severe shortage of teachers qualified and registered to teach STEM subjects requires investigation as it provides important indicators of policy-level direction if we are to emerge as a high-capacity education and, ultimately, workforce contributor to the economy. Such indicators that require to be addressed include:

- › The high cost of qualifying as a secondary school teacher, and the risk of exclusion of particular social groups, impacting on teaching workforce diversity
- › The provision of a bursary scheme for non-concurrent teacher training programmes in STEM domains
- › A recognition of the impact of teachers' lack of payment while training and the scope for year-two PMEs and concurrent programme student teachers to be paid at almost the equivalent per hour as newly qualified teachers under a year-long placement in the final phase of their programme
- › The duration of the teacher qualification and recognition process and the attractiveness of other career pathways than teaching to graduates
- › The increased availability of funded post-graduate courses and career pathways attracting remuneration while in training
- › The need to remain in constant touch with accelerating STEM field developments
- › The lack of supports in social and ethical education, and their pedagogies, as they relate to STEM areas of learning and life

The good news is that our educators are not short of motivation. What is needed is a coherent framework under which their innate love of their subject areas, their indisputable agency and innovative capacities,

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and their student-centred approaches to their vocation, each offer a perfectly aligned set of conditions under which STEM education can be invigorated as a national priority. In particular, the scope for engaging with our technological universities and other relevant collaborators in terms of their capacity to support teacher professional learning in our schools could be further developed.

#### ***Pillar 4. Use evidence to support STEM education***

Policymakers and curriculum developers require to be constantly informed by international developments in education practice, prioritisation, and policy. At school level, the embedding of an evidence-based paradigm of:

- › resource deployment
- › improvements in teaching, learning, and assessment
- › decision-making in terms of the use of precious school time
- › engagement with external business, community, FET, and other third-level institutions

all sit perfectly with the School Self-Evaluation model. What is required is a review by the Inspectorate of the 'tools' of SSE to determine their alignment with emerging policy under the Digital and STEM education priorities and to support teachers in their use.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- › **A successor to the current STEM education policy must be coherent with the current Digital Learning Strategy, as schools are currently overloaded with initiatives in all areas of their practice**
- › **Contemporary STEM education requires that schools are adequately resourced, and the Department should prioritise the provision of:**
  - 1. Laboratory Assistants**
  - 2. Dedicated time for teachers involved in STEM projects with their students**
  - 3. Annualised equipment replacement and software upgrading grants**
  - 4. Appropriate laboratory-class space and storage areas**
  - 5. Dedicated time to coordinate STEM teaching and activities, including health and safety compliance**

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## Goal 4: Break down barriers for groups at risk of exclusion

### Objectives

- › Provide access to appropriate education and equitable supports for all children and young people
- › Improve the learning experience and learning outcomes for learners impacted by disadvantage
- › Implement a school building programme which prioritises new school places in areas of demographic growth, appropriate special education provision, essential refurbishment and maintenance, ICT and digital needs, and climate action.

### Mitigating Disadvantage

#### Soundings

Schools in affluent areas have the lowest share of schools experiencing an increase in days lost per student (25.4 per cent), followed by 26.1 per cent for schools in marginally above average areas, 27.9 per cent for marginally below average, and 32.9 per cent for disadvantaged areas<sup>44</sup>

School-level patterns of non-attendance, 2022/23 and 2023/24 (ESRI, 2026)

School absence is closely related to gender, SEN status, and socioeconomic backgrounds, with girls, students with SEN, and those from less affluent families having higher rates of absenteeism.

ESRI Report (2024)<sup>45</sup>

'This Government will:

- › Establish a new DEIS Plus Scheme to support schools with the highest level of educational disadvantage to improve educational outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy
- › Expand and strengthen measures to address the problems which exist with school attendance, including examining how youth services can partner with the formal education system to improve engagement with young people.
- › Expand the Home School Liaison Co-ordinator Scheme with new posts for schools demonstrating high need'

Programme for Government 2025

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<sup>44</sup> School-level patterns of non-attendance, 2022/23 and 2023/24

<sup>45</sup> 'Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI

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JMB sees clear evidence of the Department’s commitment to social inclusion and to schools within the DEIS Programme in particular, with supports including:

- › Enhanced per-capital grants for DEIS schools
- › Access to Home School Community Liaison coordinator services
- › Access to the School Completion Programme
- › Access to literacy and numeracy supports
- › Access to planning supports from the Inspectorate
- › Priority access to a range of professional learning for teachers and school leaders
- › Enhanced access to National Educational Psychological Service
- › Access to an enhanced allocation of guidance teachers at post primary

The publication this year of a new DEIS Plan and the emergence of a DEIS Plus Scheme are equally welcome, as is the development of an innovative, more school-inclusive, model of DEIS Evaluation by the Inspectorate.

The aims of the new DEIS Plan in particular points to a number of core areas which merit consideration here. The overall scope of the Plan is to:

- › Build on the positive work already done under the DEIS plan 2017
- › Improve the opportunities and achievement levels for those at risk of educational disadvantage in all schools
- › Work towards a more flexible system of supports to ensure that the needs of children and young people are met
- › Improve equality of opportunity for young people, with an emphasis on retention to Leaving Certificate
- › Provide the longer-term strategic vision and objectives for tackling educational disadvantage.
- › Focus on school attendance and tackling the rate of absenteeism in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools
- › Better align the range of cross-government supports which are available and bring the various support services together
- › Better align with the variety of strategies and policies already in the system
- › Continue the work on the development of a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework with the ESRI

Feedback from principals and deputies in the almost 70 voluntary secondary schools within the programme points to a need to give more urgency to, in particular, three student centred aims within the Plan and to match the rhetoric with resource and personnel investment to bring about real improvement:

### ***1. Improve the opportunities and achievement levels for those at risk of educational disadvantage in all schools***

Schools serving disadvantaged communities agree that ‘the basic challenges come not from a lack of strategies for improvement but from having to endure the scourge of impoverishment’ (Hargreaves 2004). Schools reflect the society, local and national, in which they find themselves – it’s not the other way around. Inequalities in Irish society are deep and profound and have been exacerbated by almost a decade of economic recession followed immediately by a global pandemic and its long aftermath in socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Children

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and young people bear the effects of family distress more than adults and the school becomes an arena for both acting-out and the more worrying acting-in. Our school leaders tell us that the incomprehensible decision by the Department not to include post-primary schools in the piloting of emotional and psychotherapy provision has left DEIS schools without this essential service and must be reversed without delay.

In terms of planning, schools find that baseline and subsequent data gathering exercises on literacy, numeracy, attendance, retention, progression etc. to be insightful and helpful. The proposal that significant and sustained improvements on these multiple fronts can continue to be achieved with limited resources (personnel, money, and time) as well as lack of relevant TPL have been identified as barriers to progress. School leaders know that you can't teach a child anything if they are not at school and they therefore pay significant attention to school climate as the key lever in retention. As most climate factors are not measured or reported-upon in school inspections, schools understandably give less weight to quantifiable accountability measures and prioritise a 'what works' approach aimed at enhancing relationships and affirmation of progress.

It is also self-evident that investment in the development of leadership capacity – existing and prospective – within DEIS schools must become a priority. A key element of our JMB DEIS Seminars as well as within our JMB National DEIS Advisory Group is the sharing of ideas, particularly around structure and planning, between schools. Principals and teacher-leaders universally acknowledge that their disadvantage-mitigating strategies need structure, and they express most affirmation for tried-and-proven ideas which help put a shape on their provision. There exists scope for a 'DEIS research, advisory, and support service' which could act as a 'hub' for such sharing as well as capacity-building across DEIS schools of all sectors.

## **2. *Work towards a more flexible system of in-school supports to ensure that the needs of children and young people are met***

Trauma and the impact of adverse childhood experiences are dealt with elsewhere in this submission and require the Department's immediate attention. Meanwhile, the proportion of students within schools in the DEIS programme demonstrating a clear need for psychological support, assessment, and intervention services remains one of the most serious unmet needs of the contemporary educational system in Ireland.

Feedback from our principals unambiguously point to a set of challenges for a psychological service:

### *NEPS psychologists:*

- › Are generally excellent – professional, courteous, and caring
- › Lack awareness of the role complexities of SETs, SNAs, and of related circulars
- › Can frequently make unrealistic recommendations
- › Must bring greater clarity to their role

### *Relationship with school personnel:*

- › Relationship-building is key, and this demands that educational psychologists are:
  - Responsive and available
  - Empathic and authentic
  - Reliable and accountable

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- › Relationships must become stable and long-term: we need stability and continuity
  - › Promotions are taking psychologists away from schools and we have to continually re-start relationships, information-sharing, and prioritisation

*Engagement with schools:*

- › Citing the policy that ‘schools are best placed to ... [everything]’ is frustrating and feels like a responsibility hand-over – putting everything back on schools who don’t have the necessary expertise
- › The Department needs to recruit more psychologists and other personnel, specialists, therapeutic, and administrative
- › ‘Parachuting’ a psychologist in on a once-off basis is ultimately unproductive

*Service Model:*

- › ‘Up to 52% of our students have AEN or SEN and our school is allocated only three assessments a year – we are told to ‘pick the ones you want reports done on’
- › Current service levels are inequitable and unethical – assessments and other services should be allocated on a pro-rata basis of identified need
- › ‘We absolutely need more school visits and assessments as a matter of urgency’
- › Assessment reports are vital for strategic individualised curriculum access and engagement planning
- › There still exists a serious pandemic-related backlog of cases which require immediate psychological support
- › Why are schools having to use charities to fund necessary assessments and reports?
- › There is no consistent multi-disciplinary team engagement by school psychologists, unlike SENOs and EWOs who make themselves available for team meetings with parents
- › GPs are playing a much bigger role recently in seeking interventions and special provision: GP -> primary care -> AON -> ASD report ... this takes two years and costs schools €2,000
- › Lucena Clinic<sup>46</sup> and CAMHS issue standard letters saying ‘get a NEPS report for this child’
- › External professionals have little understanding of the bottlenecks schools must work with
- › Schools need emergency support with ongoing student aggression – levels of professional development and expert intervention are currently inadequate
- › A priority intervention service for behaviours of concern is urgently required, and trauma informed therapy is the missing link to mitigate behaviours of concern
- › We need a model of much earlier intervention at primary and even early childhood level, to identify and put in place supports in advance of reaching post-primary teenage years when it’s too late
- › NEPS should assign a psychologist to clusters of primary and post-primary schools to support transitions

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<sup>46</sup> <https://lucenaclinic.ie/>

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*Whole staff supports*

- › There is a disconnect with whole-school pressures, demands, capacities, and other realities
- › We nonetheless need teacher professional learning delivered by engaged and engaging specialists from the psychological service

### **3. Focus on school attendance and tackling the rate of absenteeism in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools**

As with the successful engagement of students with special educational needs, the ‘Three Ps’ equally apply to those young people growing up in families and communities facing profound and enduring social and economic challenges:

- › *Present*: Are all our students attending, and are they all visible in the spaces and events where our school community has ownership?
- › *Participating*: Are all our students able to join in in the life of our school in its fullest sense, does everyone feel welcome and valued?
- › *Progressing*: Are all our students achieving, and are all of our pupils able to be ambitious about their goals?

Clearly participation and subsequent progress are impossible without the student being present – ‘present’ meaning both physically at school and ‘present’ to the learning process, two quite distinct requirements. In terms of physical presence, the pre- and post-pandemic closures data reveals the scope and depth of the challenge:

<b>Students with 20 or more days absent</b>	<b>2019-2020</b>	<b>2020-2021</b>	<b>2021-2022</b>	<b>2022-2023</b>
<b>Primary</b>	19,067 (5%)	39,879 (11.1%)	173,072 (40.3%)	110,151 (25.1%)
<b>Post Primary</b>	20,977 (9.5%)	21,867 (12%)	69,097 (26.8%)	65,883 (22.3%)

In this context, reporting at the 20-day absence point both represents a very low bar in terms of remediating the impact of a student missing 12% of their school year and a system response does not, in fact, even get triggered by the making of such a report.

School absenteeism is obviously a multi-factored phenomenon, but our DEIS school principals universally affirm the concluding observation here from the Tusla Education Support Service’s *Five-Year Plan for School Attendance: 2023-2028*

*‘School absenteeism can lead to a range of negative outcomes that include academic, social and emotional challenges, substance abuse, crime, poverty and unemployment, with the long-term effects of Covid yet to be determined. Given the negative relationship between absenteeism and these outcomes, it is important that TESS works together with other stakeholders to combat barriers to school attendance’.*

*‘Moreover, according to the OECD (2024) report on ‘Combating Absenteeism Post Covid’, there is also some initial evidence that points to a shift in parental attitudes that is negatively impacting their children’s attendance. According to the OECD, the pandemic has affected vulnerable children in particular, emphasising the importance of support for students with Special Education Needs and mental health difficulties’*

School communities can, and are, doing everything in their power to provide a school culture that encourages ‘presence’ and those in the DEIS programme going to extreme lengths to follow up on

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serially absent students, visit families, and address learning loss due to absence. What is needed, however, is a framework of advice, guidance, and support around changing parental attitudes to school attendance, clarity on the rights and responsibilities of all parties, and intervention-level support of external state agencies and authorities in respect of chronic absenteeism in compulsory-age students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **JMB strongly urges the Department to immediately provide for the allocation of additional deputy principal capacity across the complete range of post primary schools as a matter of priority, beginning with the elimination of partial DP allocations in smaller schools and a pro-rata increase in DP allocation to all DEIS schools**
- › **To address chronic absenteeism, the HSCL Scheme should be expanded to non-DEIS schools with high absolute (as opposed to relative) levels of their student population coming from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds**
- › **Government must now, as a matter of national priority, commit to equalisation and adequate funding and remove the necessity for schools to seek voluntary contributions from families**
- › **JMB seeks absolute clarity on the stability of future funding streams in relation to the provision of free schoolbooks and materials, and indeed all grants. Such funding should be secured for schools a multi-annual basis**
- › **Increased funding to levels established prior to the financial emergency, and immediate index-linking of all capitation grants, represents a more sustainable model than relying on once off cost-of-living measures**
- › **We request that a detailed review of the free book scheme be undertaken with the views of school management comprehended in any revisions to the model**

## Buildings and Infrastructure

The Programme for Government's stated ambition is to:

*Continue to increase the number of special schools and special classes across the country to ensure that children can go to school within their local community*

Such a policy of radical inclusion, reiterated under our United Nations commitment, cannot possibly be realised without a whole-of-government response in terms of investment in school infrastructure. Leaving the Department of Education to struggle with trade-offs as occurred when the ICT grant was abandoned to create capital funding for special education in 2022/23 must not be allowed to recur. The required macro-investment must be committed-to at the Cabinet table with its long-term funding streams approved by DPER and released on a multi-annual basis to allow for proper planning.

Many voluntary secondary schools have been serving their communities for more than 100 years. Many were built or extended-to with no, or limited, State assistance and are very energy inefficient. They are now in need of major refurbishment, not to mention providing for additional special class capacity.

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JMB is concerned that due to increasing building costs, together with substantial delays in the design process, that the completion of much needed additional accommodation and the refurbishment of existing accommodation is being delayed. It is vital that methods of delivery be put in place so that all projects be progressed through the Department's construction phases in an efficient and speedy manner.

The JMB welcomes the Department's increased support for its School Building Advisory Service which is highly regarded by our schools and facilitates both school management and the Department's School Building Unit in the delivery of projects. The JMB Service now supports the principals and boards of management of several hundred primary schools in addition to our own voluntary secondary schools. In addition to the day-to-day service that is provided to schools, including assisting with the appointment of design teams, the provision of Special Classes in both sectors continues to be a particular focus for the Advisory Service.

JMB welcomes the cooperation and assistance it receives from all the officials in the School Building Unit. However, for individual schools, receiving responses to phone calls and emails in a timely manner remains a significant concern. In particular, a significant bottleneck in the service has emerged due to an insufficient number of technical staff in the Unit.

### *The NDP Sectoral Plan*

The JMB welcomes the publication in January 2026 of the NDP Sectoral Plan for 2026 to 2030 period. We note that the Plan's initial focus is on completion of close to 300 projects currently at construction stage. The Plan also contains the first tranche of 105 School Building Projects to progress to tender and/or construction over the course of 2026 and 2027. The list includes 39 Large Scale Projects, 41 Additional Accommodation Projects, and 25 modular projects. All those school communities whose projects have been included on the list are obviously delighted. However, for those school communities whose projects have not been listed, it has been a source of great disappointment. Those projects were approved by the Department of Education some years ago; they have gone through all the design stages, and those school communities would legitimately believe that they would now be proceeding to tender and construction. The great number of those projects at post-primary level include provision for SEN and for practical subjects which have already been identified as necessary by the School Building Unit. It is imperative that decisions on the next tranche of projects be made as soon as possible. The JMB welcomes the proposal for stakeholder engagement to identify the most urgent priorities for 2028 and 2029 and looks forward to being part of that consultation.

There are numerous very small Additional Accommodation projects ready to go to tender and construction and JMB strongly believes that those projects be approved to tender without having to wait until 2028 or 2029.

The JMB also welcomes the Energy and Condition Survey of the school estate which will be finalised in 2026. Given the poor state of many of our schools, it is imperative that funding be provided as a matter of urgency to refurbish and modernise those schools.

The JMB also welcomes the first tranche of projects announced under the Climate Action Summer Works Scheme in November 2025. We look forward to a second tranche of projects being approved in the autumn of 2026.

The JMB welcomes the grant-aid for the repurposing of classrooms to facilitate the opening of Special Classes in 2026. The JMB Building Officers continue to support both voluntary secondary schools and primary schools in identifying suitable classrooms for repurposing. They appreciate the continued consultation with officials of the Department in this work. However, many schools who wish to open Special Classes simply do not have space within their existing accommodation to provide a suitable

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classroom for repurposing. Those schools require additional accommodation in the form of a permanent building or modular accommodation as a matter of urgency.

While the start-up grant of €30,000 being made available for each classroom being repurposed is very welcome, it is clear that the additional grant of €70,000 is insufficient in many cases.

The JMB welcomes the introduction of a Minor Works Grant at post-primary level in December 2028. We welcome the proposed engagement with relevant stakeholders to develop an appropriate methodology for targeting this increased investment.

The JMB also welcomes the proposed commencement of a PE Hall programme from 2029 onwards.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- › **A substantial increase in capital funding is required so the programme of major capital projects, Additional Accommodation projects can progress through the tender and construction stages over the 2026 – 2029 period**
- › **Small Additional Accommodation Projects that have completed design stages should be approved to tender and construction in the current year**
- › **The Additional Accommodation Scheme is providing much needed additional facilities to schools. However, there are many schools where the existing buildings are so deficient, that only a whole-school approach is appropriate. In light of the Energy and Condition Survey of the school estate, the Additional Accommodation Scheme needs to be expanded to cater for the refurbishment of existing buildings**
- › **Funding for the Schools Energy Retrofit Pathfinder Programme needs to be increased substantially so that a far greater number of schools can benefit from the programme on an annual basis**
- › **Increased funding for the Emergency Works Scheme is required**
- › **The promised PE Hall programme is long overdue and should be commenced without delay**
- › **The proposal to introduce a Minor Works Grant for Post-Primary schools needs to be brought forward to 2027**
- › **A General Purpose Area/Dining Area needs to be allocated to every school and not just to new schools or to those on the major capital programme**
- › **The programme to provide permanent SEN classrooms in schools should be continued but efforts must be made to shorten the period from approval to construction in the case of a permanent building**
- › **The grant of €70,000 for repurposing should be increased to meet current costs.**
- › **The Department's Planning and Building Unit requires to be adequately funded so that decisions on Stage Reports can be made within a reasonable timeframe and that funding transfers and queries from schools be dealt with promptly**

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## Concluding Comments

In closing, the Joint Managerial Body reaffirms its mandate to advocate on behalf of voluntary secondary schools and the communities they serve, and to contribute constructively to national education policy development. This Pre-Budget Submission 2027 reflects the lived experience of school leaders who are navigating an unprecedented convergence of curricular reform, inclusive education reform, regulatory expansion and workforce pressure.

The JMB has set out a clear and evidence informed case across multiple policy domains that the pace and scale of current reform can only be realised where schools are equipped with sufficient senior leadership capacity at principal and deputy principal level. Where schools are expected to implement far-reaching reform without that capacity, the risk is not simply implementation delay. Reform may instead be enacted in ways that satisfy formal and procedural requirements without embedding meaningful and sustained change in school practice. This, in turn, risks further deterioration in school leader and teacher wellbeing and a gradual loss of confidence among parents and the wider public in the State's capacity to deliver on its educational commitments.

In addition, the JMB has argued for the full and coherent implementation of the NCSE's policy advice on inclusive education, recognising that piecemeal or partial adoption, particularly where core structural recommendations remain unfunded, risks compounding existing pressures on schools and undermining the integrity and credibility of inclusive reform.

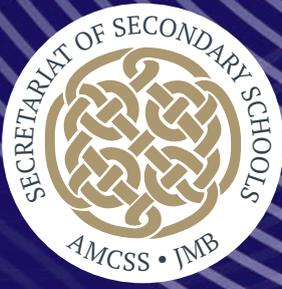
The JMB remains fully committed to continued dialogue and collaboration with the Department of Education and Youth, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and system partners. However, meaningful engagement must now be matched by commensurate structural investment, particularly in senior leadership capacity, if schools are to sustain the responsibilities being placed upon them.

The Joint Managerial Body acknowledges with appreciation the sustained commitment of voluntary secondary schools, the Councils of JMB and AMCSS, and colleagues across the Department of Education and Youth and associated agencies. Constructive engagement and open communication remain essential to maintaining positive working relationships and ensuring that reform is progressed in a manner that is coherent, sustainable and aligned with our shared objective of strengthening Ireland's education system.

This submission is ultimately grounded in a shared obligation to the young people in our care, and to the educators who lead, teach, and support them. A decisive and proportionate response in Budget 2027 will be critical in ensuring that Ireland's ambitions for inclusive, high-quality education are realised in practice and not diminished by avoidable capacity constraints.

**Mrs Deirdre Matthews**  
**General Secretary**  
**Joint Managerial Body**





Summary of  
Recommendations

**JMB**  
**Pre-Budget**  
**Submission**  
2027

Institutional Reform and  
Infrastructural Capacity

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## Special Educational Needs

In our sector, voluntary secondary schools are extraordinarily inclusive, innovative, professionally committed, and welcoming communities, building on strong ethical and, indeed, spiritual foundations when it comes to living out each school's expressed ethos. The recent and ongoing increased investment by the state in the expansion of services provided by the National Council for Special Education is now paying dividends in terms of the support services available to schools and an enhancement of professionalisation at both local and regional levels.

That said, the state's policy of educating virtually every child and young person in their local, mainstream setting will demand investments in people, plant, and professionalisation if we are, as a nation, to begin to achieve in reality the levels of inclusion to which we aspire in rhetoric.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **The JMB urges the Department and Government to avoid reactive, incoherent responses to the increase in demand for special education settings and to commence what the NCSE policy advice recommendation terms *'The progressive realisation of an inclusive school system'***
- › **JMB is calling for dedicated professional learning provision to principals and deputies in the area of SEN-specific leadership, and for a significant expansion of funded access for teachers to post-graduate diploma programmes in special education**
- › **JMB contends that the systems-level knowledge, authority, and agency at school level can best be mediated by a core SEN team working with a deputy principal(s) rather than single-teacher posts of responsibility**
- › **To enhance their effectiveness and, indeed, status, across the school and system, SETs require their workloads to be manageable, their professional learning and qualifications to be funded and accredited, their capacity to work as effective teams developed, and their identity recognised by the Teaching Council**
- › **To meet the expansion in responsibility for special education provision at school level, we are seeking a realistic additional allocation of ring-fenced hours calculated on the basis of the school's SET Allocation as set out in Circular 03/2024 for SEN leadership and coordination**
- › **The Programme for Government commitments to continue to increase the number of special schools and special classes and to streamline the delivery of modular accommodation will require increased funding to the NDP and a multi-annual commitment to major capital release from DPER and the Department of Finance in the 2027 Budget**
- › **Principals do not receive any recognition for the additional staffing responsibilities as a result of their SNA allocation, which can be substantial, and this anomaly must be addressed in advance of any changes to this particular sector of our schools' workforce**
- › **Under the current SNA workforce review, a structure for in-school management of SNAs should be designed, resourced, and implemented**

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## School Leadership – The Challenge of Capacity-Building

The JMB, as its highest budgetary priority, here sets out its case for a progressive extension of the Department’s decision to provide for additional deputy principal capacity in post-primary schools. We make this our key policy position in light of:

- › the changed legislative and regulatory environment emerging as a result of government policy around the mainstreaming of virtually all students, including those with profound and enduring special educational needs, and,
- › the Department’s own prioritisation of leadership for learning within a rapidly changing junior and senior cycle curricular landscape

The need for senior leadership teams to drive meaningful change at all levels of the school has never been more critical. Increased leadership capacity is essential to effect the deep change envisaged by current policy initiatives.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **JMB strongly urges the Department to immediately provide for the allocation of additional deputy principal capacity under a ratio of 1:300 across the majority of post primary schools as a matter of priority**
- › **No school with an enrolment over 151 should be allocated a fraction of a deputy principal and schools within the DEIS programme require an enhanced deputy principal allocation**
- › **Basing a school’s senior leadership allocation on student numbers does not comprehend number of staff the principal has to manage, including increasing numbers of SET teachers, Special Class teachers and SNAs. The allocation model should therefore be reviewed and amended to reflect this reality**
- › **JMB considers that the Department should establish the current extent of administrative supports in schools before developing another layer of admin staffing at grade 5 and develop an evidence-based allocation model of administrative support for all schools**
- › **In light of evolving policy around inclusion, curriculum, child-protection, anti-bullying, and behaviour management, the required systems-level knowledge, delegated authority, year-round availability, and agency within schools can best be mediated by enhancing capacity at deputy principal level**
- › **JMB is seeking an independent review with a mandate to reimagine an appropriate leadership and management structure in schools to support quality education. Such a review will require to comprehend the principal’s workload and responsibilities, their wellbeing and psychological health, professional preparation and development, support structures, step-down and exit-routes, and make recommendations for the remediation of a principal recruitment and retention crisis**
- › **JMB considers the Department should give consideration to the emergence of more clearly defined reporting lines and a tiered leadership structure for teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders, with senior leaders providing sustained strategic leadership and oversight of middle leadership in support of school improvement.**

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## Supporting Meaningful Curriculum Change

The centrality of the apex school leader and senior leadership team in terms of curricular change is well affirmed in the literature. Indeed, management and administrative functions, while often burdensome, cannot be mediated in isolation from the vision and values underpinning leadership. The UL finding that *'curriculum coherence extends beyond the alignment of curriculum goals, enactment, and assessment, and needs to also consider the local school culture and context and the extent to which the curriculum changes align with the school's values and practices'* represents a clear association between leadership capacity and the establishment of a learning culture in the school. Such capacity challenges are at the heart of the JMB's reiteration of its call for enhancement measures in the form of additional deputy principal allocation across the sector.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › An acceptance of the, now proven, relationship between school culture and the embedding of curricular change demands that the principal and senior leadership team – the chief culture creators – are developed, and supported in their role
- › The 2024 ESRI report and the findings of the UL final report of the impact of junior cycle reform should be carefully considered by the Department and Minister, with policy and resourcing adjustments made in light of its findings
- › In this context, the evident incoherence between curricular intentions and the cultural change in learning, teaching, and assessment practices at junior cycle require immediate attention and resourcing
- › The Department should expand the provision of high-quality professional learning and post-graduate development opportunities for teachers in SPHE and in RSE
- › As senior cycle developments accelerate and are profoundly connected to the experience from first to third year, junior cycle assessment in general requires a system-level response in light of the impact study findings

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## Teacher Supply – A Multifaceted Challenge

Everyone with a stake in the education enterprise has work to do around the urgent need to develop and recruit appropriately qualified teachers to the profession and to create the working conditions under which they will want to stay. Since educators of all kinds are central to the flourishing of a democratic and inclusive civic society, that society itself must act and communicate in ways that recognise the great national asset we have in our values-driven teacher workforce, and affirm the profession in our discourse.

In terms of immediate actions, JMB strongly supports the Department, the Teaching Council, and other relevant agencies in addressing teacher supply challenges from as many approaches as possible. We urge the Minister and her officials to maintain a level of urgency and agency around this crisis as demographic trends alone will not provide any solutions.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **The PME programme costs between €6,000 and €8,500 per year for EU students, with total two-year costs typically ranging from €12,000 to over €16,000, making a teaching career inaccessible to a range of social groups**
- › **The two-year PME programme must therefore be independently reviewed and reconfigured to provide for a deeper single-school embedded experience, under a paid placement model as is the case with other professional development pathways such as nursing and across the wider private sector**
- › **Strategic and binding proposals to address the issue of inadequate teacher supply must emerge from the national conversation on this issue – self regulation by ITE providers and granular qualification recognition criteria for teacher registration must be addressed as part of this process**
- › **Experiential, and in particular, teacher wellbeing factors, must be comprehended in mitigating supply, retention, and attrition challenges in the workforce**
- › **Data on teacher wellbeing should be gathered in the next round of OECD PISA testing**

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## Fit for Purpose Staffing Allocations

Ireland already has a higher ratio of students to teaching staff at secondary level than the European average, higher compulsory instruction time per student per year, as well as significantly higher number of hours teaching time per year per teacher. It should not be forgotten that the increase of the PTR to 19:1 in Budget 2009 coupled with the reduction in guidance counselling, EAL, and Traveller support hours from schools (an effective PTR increase), have had a very severe impact on the educational experience being offered in schools.

The pupil teacher ratio for schools in the Free Education sector must therefore be restored to 18:1 in order to alleviate the impact of demographic change at post primary and the impact of the cutbacks on staffing in schools in recent years and the pupil-teacher ratio in fee-charging schools should be reduced as a first step from 23:1 to 21:1. Meanwhile, the allocation for LCA should be increased from 0.5 to 1.0. In a school with 5th and 6th year LCA operating in distinct classes, the school receives just 11 hours additional allocation but must provide 56 hours of tuition.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **The pupil teacher ratio for schools in the Free Education sector must be progressively restored to 18:1 in order to alleviate the impact of the cutbacks on staffing in schools during the economic crash and to reduce class sizes to allow for authentic inclusion and differentiated teaching and assessment, as well as providing for the range of subjects envisaged in SCR and flexible learning pathways, while making provision for individualisation of AACs across all senior cycle subjects**
- › **The allocation for LCA should be increased from 0.5 to 1.0. In a school with 5th and 6th year LCA operating in distinct classes, the school receives just 11 hours additional allocation but must provide 56 hours of tuition**
- › **The JMB strongly advocates for a review of Circular 04/98 to eliminate the teaching hours of deputy principals, both as an initial essential measure to improve the PTR and to enhance the capacity of senior leadership teams in schools**
- › **Fee-charging schools, a long-standing and successful example of Public-Private Partnership, are a net contributor to the economy. The pupil-teacher ratio in these schools should be reduced as a first step from 23:1 to 21:1. Deputy principals should not be obliged to erode their leadership duties to make up for an inadequate subject teaching allocation**
- › **JMB urges the Minister and Department to engage with JMB on a plan to introduce state funded chaplains across our sector as an equity measure**

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## Investment and Funding of Schools

The successes we have seen in our educational outcomes, progression rates, and international attainment rankings have been achieved as a result of state and school partnership. Inflating the policy demand while leaving investment static will only lead to diminishing outcomes, a loss of trust in the partnership approach, burnout and exhaustion at school leadership level, and superficial compliance without deep change.

The requirement for voluntary secondary schools to uniquely source approximately 30% of their day-to-day funding from their families and communities represents perhaps the longest-running failure of the state to treat its citizens equitably.

The JMB urges the immediate index-linking of all capitation grants to allow schools to effectively manage their finances. Under a three-year policy which should readily be agreed at government level, the Minister could significantly reduce the need for schools in our sector to seek voluntary contributions from families, a measure which would alleviate the pressures on all concerned.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › All per-capita grant aid to schools must be both increased and inflation-proofed by being consumer price index-linked on an annual basis
- › A government-level commitment must be made to eliminating, over a three-year period, the need for schools to seek voluntary contributions from families by addressing the need for enhanced capitation in all our schools
- › Government must address the inequitable funding of schools in the Voluntary Secondary sector by completing equalisation process
- › Schools in the fee-charging sector are generally grant-aided either 50% or 0% of the rest of the voluntary secondary sector in the free-scheme and this policy should be reviewed in light of the financial pressures on many minority faith schools
- › JMB wishes to see an end to the situation where economically disadvantaged students availing of the SEC block grant to access education in a school of their faith are further disadvantaged by not being comprehended by the book scheme
- › JMB seeks to open a conversation with the Department around a revised funding model for minority faith schools with a view to establishing more equitable treatment of children from such families

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# Resourcing High Quality Guidance and Psychotherapy Services

The JMB continues to seek a meaningful increase in provision for guidance and counselling services in the face of a generation of students with unprecedented needs in terms of an emerging crisis in terms of chronic student absenteeism leading to significant levels of learning and metacognitive skills loss; complex career-plan support needs; as well as the ongoing challenges of traumatised, frequently relocated, refugee children and an redeveloped senior cycle demanding significant guidance counselling in terms of expanded course choices and progression routes.

JMB is also urging the Minister to translate the Programme for Government commitment to *'Review the mental health and wellbeing pilots that are ongoing in primary and post-primary schools and expand them'*, by establishing specialist one-to-one psychotherapeutic supports, especially across schools within the DEIS programme, and also over time all schools nationally, for students experiencing trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **The JMB urges the Minister to expand into post-primary the scheme to deploy emotional counselling/psychotherapeutic supports in primary schools to address trauma, anxiety, and mental health difficulties of vulnerable children and young people**
- › **JMB seeks a meaningful increase in provision for guidance counselling in the face of a generation of students with unprecedented needs**
- › **JMB urges the Department to support the training of new guidance counsellors, particularly in light of (a) the cost to individual teachers and (b) substituted release for training, supervision, and work-shadowing**
- › **In implementing their anti-bullying policies as set out in the Bí Cineálta framework, schools' most pressing needs centre on time and expertise**
- › **The adverse treatment of fee-charging schools in terms of their reduced guidance and counselling allocation (based, as it is on a higher PTR), should be discontinued**

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## ICT in Schools – New Challenges and Evolving Opportunities

JMB very much welcomes the establishment of a standardised payment period for ICT grant funding which will now be incorporated into the annual grant payments calendar for schools. This provides clarity and certainty and will assist schools with their budget management and medium-term ICT investment strategies. The €35 million in ICT grant funding in 2026 under the *Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027* nonetheless represents a cut of €15m in 2025 and 2026.

As AI continues to shape the future of education, it is important to strike a balance between its benefits and the potential risks, ensuring that it enhances the learning experience without compromising essential human interactions and skills development. Such evolution will require enhanced levels of digital, and indeed, ethical maturity, unforeseen in advance of its emergence and while the opportunities continue to reveal themselves, threats to examination integrity and student online safety cannot be ignored.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › JMB welcomes the establishment of a standardised payment period for ICT grant funding but the cut of €15m when compared to previous tranches highlights the overall inadequacy of the grant
- › The significantly higher demands placed on schools within the DEIS programme in terms of addressing digital poverty will not be met by an additional €3.02 per student
- › Grant aid must be restored for the purchasing, maintenance, and support of school administration packages, and all software licenses in use in schools
- › To underpin the three pillars of the Digital Strategy for Schools, adequate funding must provide for school-wide remote device purchase, up-to-date teacher professional learning in digitally supported teaching and assessment, on-site technical and administrative support, and enhanced Wi-Fi infrastructure
- › Adverse treatment of minority faith schools in the fee-charging sector, in which grants such as those for ICT are reduced by 50%, must be discontinued
- › Adequate support must be provided to educators in the face of AI threats to student safety
- › Clarity of expectation must be provided to educators to ensure the integrity of high-stakes examination outcomes

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# Providing the Highest Quality STEM Education Experience

The Department's STEM Education Policy Statement requires targeted investment if its ambitions are to be realised, particularly as its associated Action Plan is completely devoid of spending commitments. The Department must recognise the importance of positive engagement with STEM learning, and this requires the early identification of dispositions within young people and tapping into their enthusiasms. Such identification goes beyond the science classroom and requires a school-wide responsiveness to students' innate capacities and excitement in terms of enrichment activities. Yet again such a claim on teacher capacity demands senior school leadership support, advocacy, and enabling measures and acts as yet further evidence for the need to increase deputy principal capacity across our school system.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **A successor to the current STEM education policy must be coherent with the current Digital Learning Strategy, as schools are currently overloaded with initiatives in all areas of their practice**
- › **Contemporary STEM education requires that schools are adequately resourced, and the Department should prioritise the provision of:**
  1. **Laboratory Assistants**
  2. **Dedicated time for teachers involved in STEM projects with their students**
  3. **Annualised equipment replacement and software upgrading grants**
  4. **Appropriate laboratory-class space and storage areas**
  5. **Dedicated time to coordinate STEM teaching and activities, including health and safety compliance**

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## Mitigating Disadvantage

The publication this year of a new DEIS Plan and the emergence of a DEIS Plus Scheme are very welcome, as is the development of an innovative, more school-inclusive, model of DEIS Evaluation by the Inspectorate. Meanwhile, the proportion of students within schools in the DEIS programme demonstrating a clear need for psychological support, assessment, and intervention services remains one of the most serious unmet needs of the contemporary educational system in Ireland.

Participation and subsequent progress are impossible without the student being present – ‘present’ meaning both physically at school and ‘present’ to the learning process, two quite distinct requirements. School communities can, and are, doing everything in their power to provide a school culture that encourages ‘presence’ and those in the DEIS programme going to extreme lengths to follow up on serially absent students, visit families, and address learning loss due to absence. What is needed, however, is a framework of advice, guidance, and support around changing parental attitudes to school attendance, clarity on the rights and responsibilities of all parties, and intervention-level support of external state agencies and authorities in respect of chronic absenteeism in compulsory-age students.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **JMB strongly urges the Department to immediately provide for the allocation of additional deputy principal capacity across the complete range of post primary schools as a matter of priority, beginning with the elimination of partial DP allocations in smaller schools and a pro-rata increase in DP allocation to all DEIS schools**
- › **To address chronic absenteeism, the HSCL Scheme should be expanded to non-DEIS schools with high absolute (as opposed to relative) levels of their student population coming from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds**
- › **Government must now, as a matter of national priority, commit to equalisation and adequate funding and remove the necessity for schools to seek voluntary contributions from families**
- › **JMB seeks absolute clarity on the stability of future funding streams in relation to the provision of free schoolbooks and materials, and indeed all grants. Such funding should be secured for schools a multi-annual basis**
- › **Increased funding to levels established prior to the financial emergency, and immediate index-linking of all capitation grants, represents a more sustainable model than relying on once off cost-of-living measures**
- › **We request that a detailed review of the free book scheme be undertaken with the views of school management comprehended in any revisions to the model**

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## Buildings and Infrastructure

The JMB welcomes the publication in January 2026 of the NDP Sectoral Plan for 2026 to 2030 period. All those school communities whose projects have been included on the list are obviously delighted. However, for those school communities whose projects have not been listed, it has been a source of great disappointment. Such projects were approved by the Department of Education some years ago; they have gone through all the design stages, and those school communities would legitimately believe that they would now be proceeding to tender and construction. The great number of those projects at post-primary level include provision for SEN and for practical subjects which have already been identified as necessary by the School Building Unit. It is imperative that decisions on the next tranche of projects be made as soon as possible.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **A substantial increase in capital funding is required so the programme of major capital projects, Additional Accommodation projects can progress through the tender and construction stages over the 2026 – 2029 period**
- › **Small Additional Accommodation Projects that have completed design stages should be approved to tender and construction in the current year**
- › **The Additional Accommodation Scheme is providing much needed additional facilities to schools. However, there are many schools where the existing buildings are so deficient, that only a whole-school approach is appropriate. In light of the Energy and Condition Survey of the school estate, the Additional Accommodation Scheme needs to be expanded to cater for the refurbishment of existing buildings**
- › **Funding for the Schools Energy Retrofit Pathfinder Programme needs to be increased substantially so that a far greater number of schools can benefit from the programme on an annual basis**
- › **Increased funding for the Emergency Works Scheme is required.**
- › **The promised PE Hall programme is long overdue and should be commenced without delay**
- › **The proposal to introduce a Minor Works Grant for Post-Primary schools needs to be brought forward to 2027**
- › **A General Purpose Area/Dining Area needs to be allocated to every school and not just to new schools or to those on the major capital programme**
- › **The programme to provide permanent SEN classrooms in schools should be continued but efforts must be made to shorten the period from approval to construction in the case of a permanent building**
- › **The grant of €70,000 for repurposing should be increased to meet current costs.**
- › **The Department's Planning and Building Unit requires to be adequately funded so that decisions on Stage Reports can be made within a reasonable timeframe and that funding transfers and queries from schools be dealt with promptly**



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