

JMB Pre-Budget Submission 2026



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Matching Deep Policy Change with Deep Investment



Investing in School Leadership



Special Educational Needs



**The Education Enterprise: Curriculum
Change and Teacher Supply**



Fit-for-Purpose Staffing Allocations



Investment and Funding of Schools



Including All



Providing for Guidance and Psychotherapy



Technologies: New Frontiers



Buildings and Infrastructure

Introduction

*‘It’s like a tsunami’, ‘Waves-without-troughs of demands’,
‘It feels like we’re submerged in new guidelines every week’,
‘I can barely keep my head above water’...*

These ‘drowning’ metaphors voiced by contemporary voluntary secondary principals point to a significant and worrying mismatch between current policy overload and the capacity of leaders and their schools to mediate change at such a rate.

Principals navigate this mismatch against a backdrop of anxiety about the funding of their schools, concerns around uncertainty in the scheduling of grants and reliance on one-off cost of living grants, historically high levels of access to teacher statutory leave entitlements, increased financial auditing and accountability, and spiralling health and safety demands and inspections. Meanwhile, the list of change events in recent and future years includes some of the following¹:

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|--|---|--|
| › Wellbeing Framework | › Free Junior Cycle schoolbooks | › Child Protection Procedures |
| › Senior Cycle Redevelopment (SCR) Tranche 5 | › What Inspections tell us about Junior Cycle | › JCF Phase 3 |
| › SCR Tranche 4 | › Revised Child Protection Procedures | › SSE Cycle 2 |
| › Digital Strategy for Schools | › Revised Irish Exemption Process | › Critical Incident Planning |
| › Senior Cycle SPHE | › Digital Learning Framework | › LAOS 2016 |
| › SCR Tranche 3 | › LAOS 2022 | › JCF Phase 2 |
| › New LCVP Link Modules | › School Self-Evaluation Cycle 3 | › Junior Cycle Framework |
| › SCR Tranche 2 | › Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 | › Digital Strategy for Schools |
| › Child Protection Revised Procedures Implementation | › Enduring Effects of COVID 19 | › SSE Cycle 1 |
| › Review of Code of Behaviour | › Junior Cycle Framework (JCF) Phase 5 | › Literacy and Numeracy Strategy |
| › SCR Tranche 1 | › Data Protection Policy and Compliance | › Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students with SEN |
| › NCSE UDL Pilot | › POR Review requirements | › Guidelines for the use of Reduced School Days in Schools |
| › TY Programme Statement | › Revised Admissions Procedures | › School-based Summer Programme scheme |
| › Free Senior Cycle schoolbooks | › JCF Phase 4 | › HEAR/DARE college access |
| › Whole School Guidance Plan | › STEAM Education Policy | › Increased RACE applications |
| › Maintenance Guidelines for Schools | › Updated Literacy and Numeracy Guidelines | › Attendance strategy |
| › BÍ Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour | › SET Allocation Guidelines | |
| › Behaviours of Concern and the Relate Framework | | |

In any other field of employment, such an accelerating and cumulative rate of change without a parallel increase in staffing and resourcing would be deemed to be psychologically damaging. It is time for a whole-of-government response to this crisis.

¹ Source: Oide, Enhanced Gantt Chart of Post-Primary Education Reforms in Ireland

Successive Ministers citing the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as the key limiting factor in adequately resourcing our schools and school leadership must end. The State has a responsibility to use its resources to benefit the public good i.e., people alive today. Sequestering 'rainy day' billions may appear prudent to some, but wouldn't it be a wiser investment to make Ireland *the* world leader in education outcomes, high student engagement with a love of learning, radical inclusion of all members of the community, authoritative and empowered school leadership?

Such an investment would see the nation's enterprise status restored as captured in an IDA advertisement of some years ago: *'The Young Irish – Hire Them Before They Hire you!'*

Our Pre-Budget Submission 2026 sets out the perspective of the Joint Managerial Body as reflecting the key issues at stake in our shared national enterprise:

1. Investing in School Leadership
2. Special Educational Needs
3. The Education Enterprise: Curriculum Change and Teacher Supply
4. Fit-for-Purpose Staffing Allocations
5. Investment and Funding of Schools
6. Including All
7. Providing for Guidance and Psychotherapy
8. Technologies: New Frontiers
9. Buildings and Infrastructure



1. Investing in School Leadership

Soundings

'... 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. A need for greater senior leadership support in the form of deputy principals was emphasised time and time again'

ESRI Report (2024)²

'Principals' workloads have been growing exponentially: child protection requirements, securing contracts for schoolbooks, managing finances and hot meal programmes are just some of the non-educational demands facing school leaders. Research shows that up to half of principals are experiencing burnout due to administrative demands and do not have enough time to lead teaching and learning'

Irish Times, January 2025³

'School leaders are pivotal in the next phases of the [senior cycle] redevelopment programme. You lead the teaching and learning in your schools. You develop the networks within your schools to support teachers. You are the ones to inform parents and answer their questions. And you are the ones that students will look-to for reassurance'

DE Assistant Sec. General, Senior Cycle Redevelopment Conference, 27th February 2024

In our Pre-Budget Submission 2025, the JMB set out an unarguable case for the enhancement of leadership capacity at deputy principal level in the face of overwhelming, concurrent, policy change in demands in the areas of inclusive education and curriculum development. Our position is widely supported by other relevant stakeholders, by all three post-primary management bodies, and is acknowledged as reasonable and appropriate in conversations with senior Department officials.

In summary, our contention is that in light of evolving policy around inclusion and curriculum, the required systems-level knowledge, delegated authority, year-round availability, and agency within schools can best be mediated at deputy principal level, and not as an inadequate increase in the allocation of posts of responsibility.

² ['Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI](#)

³ [Crises and controversy: our predictions on what's next for education in 2025 – The Irish Times](#)

What emerged in Budget 2025 was precisely that – an inadequate increase in the allocation of posts of responsibility:

‘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’⁴

In other words, out of a Budget allocation, current and capital, of €11,800,000,000, just €4m could be found to invest in the single most important lever in policy implementation, effective school leadership, and even this in one of the least effective enhancement measures. If 1,000 additional posts of responsibility spread across 4,000 schools represents the then government’s regard for the work of senior management in schools, we could only look to the next government to recognise the fact that policy can only be transformed into practice through available, authoritative, and agentic leadership.

Sadly, such a hope was in vain. The Programme for Government has opted for the cheapest model of task-level intervention in the form of administrative assistance:

[This Government will:] Trial new administrative supports and arrangements for principals and boards of management to reduce the non-educational aspect of their workloads’

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.

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

The JMB, as its highest budgetary priority, here sets out its case 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, as well as 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.

⁴ <https://assets.gov.ie/306585/d14f1663-d3c5-4647-b67f-739ab208ac3b.pdf>

The centrality of effective school leadership is clearly recognised in the recent *Department of Education Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review*:

- › ‘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’

Policy development and implementation were paused during the pandemic closures. In the current school year, schools are facing the implementation challenges of wave after wave of delayed policy change on all fronts. The list for 2025 alone includes:

- › Bí Cineálta, anti-bullying policy and procedures
- › Behaviours of Concern guidelines and reporting
- › Tranche 1 Leaving Certificate subjects to be implemented
- › Revised Transition Year programmes
- › Senior cycle SPHE policy and curriculum implementation
- › Additional Assessment Components emerging in every Leaving Cert subject
- › Revised Child Protection Procedures
- › Whole School Guidance Planning
- › Revised SEN School Profiling, allocations, and guidelines
- › Exponential increases in demand for special classes
- › A National Digital Strategy for Schools, with unreliable grant provision
- › An expanding Free Schoolbooks Scheme
- › New contractual commitments around school secretaries and caretakers
- › Escalating Statutory Leave demands
- › A teacher and substitute supply crisis
- › Continuing expansion of Inspection areas, including Wellbeing
- › Navigating and integrating ethical approaches to generative AI

... and all in addition to an already overwhelming set of demands and resource limitations.

Each of the items in this list must embed collaboration and consultation, and thus, leadership capacity to support and embed authentic collaboration across the school is essential.

Successful mediation of such demands also impacts on parents, teachers, subject departments, and students, and each need levels of support which must be met as set out in the following table:

Table 1: School Stakeholder Need				
	Parents	Individual Teachers	Subject Departments	Students
Deputy Principal Availability	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
Authority	Authority to actively listen, comprehend their needs, and come to implementable solutions	Senior leadership-level influence to support capacity-building	Attending meetings; facilitating teaching and learning collaborative discussions in line with national curriculum developments; authorising resourcing and deployment decisions; evolving the timetable to meet needs	Capacity to support subject choice and subject change; problem resolution; progress monitoring and parent meetings; liaison with care team supports
Agency	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
Access	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 2: Contrasting Capacities of In-school Leadership and Administrative Positions

	Deputy Principal	Post of Responsibility	Administrative Assistant
Seniority	Highest level – part of the senior leadership team	Middle leadership	No aligned seniority
Decision-making power (e.g., resourcing)	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
Staffing authority (e.g., deployment, freeing-up, team creation)	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
Access and reporting to Principal and BOM	Daily ongoing liaison with the principal and may report to the BOM	Principal and BOM determine roles following consultation	Delegated tasks and reporting duties
Daily, weekly time availability	Optimal availability	No time for duties	Available to Principal and BOM, not school community
Annual time availability (i.e., June and August)	Available	Not available	Availability in line with terms of contract
Management body support access	Has access to advice, updates, support, and professional learning	No access	No access
Agency	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
Professional learning	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

JMB is well aware of the limitations the Department of Education and Youth face each year in terms of accessing sufficient government funding to meet its priorities, and we are grateful for the intense advocacy our Minister and officials annually display as the Budget negotiations proceed. The audience for this Pre-Budget Submission is therefore wider in scope than the Department itself. Ireland is not, thankfully, experiencing any form of financial crisis and current threats to foreign direct investment will be best met by having an optimally educated, 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:

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, 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.

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.

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 401 to 499, which require two deputy principals
 - Non-Deis schools at the enrolment category 500 to 599 which also require two deputy principals
- › Addressing the needs of medium sized schools
 - 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 3: Current Deputy Principal Allocation [Data based on Oct Returns September 2024]						
Pupil Enrolment Categories (Including PLC)	Current Deputy Principal Allocation per enrolment Category (WTEs)		Total No of Schools	Total No of Schools	Current Total Approved Deputy Principal Posts in Post Primary (WTEs)	
	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS
1-150	0.25	0.25	11	13	2.75	3.25
151-300	0.50	0.50	45	52	22.5	26
301-400	0.75	0.75	51	40	38.25	30
401-499	1	1	53	34	53	34
500-599	1	1	53	22	53	22
600-699	1	2	60	28	60	56
700-899	2	2	116	29	232	58
900-1199	3	3	89	12	267	36
1200 - 1499	3	3	11	1	33	3
1500+	3	3	1	1	3	3
Totals			490	232	764.5	271.25
		Total schools	722			

Table 4: Proposed Deputy Principal Allocation [Proposal based on Oct Returns September 2024]

Pupil Enrolment Categories (Including PLC)	Proposed Allocation (WTEs)		Proposed Increase Deputy Principal Allocation per Enrolment Category (WTEs)		Total DPs per Enrolment Category Including Requested Increase (WTEs)			Net increase per enrolment category in DP numbers (WTEs)	
	Non-DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS	Total DPs Including Proposed Requested Increase (WTEs)	DEIS		Non DEIS	DEIS
1-150	0.5	0.5	0.25	0.25	5.5	6.5		2.75	3.25
151-300	1	1	0.5	0.5	45	52		22.5	26
301-400	1	1	0.25	0.25	51	40		12.75	10
401-499	1	2	0	1	53	68		0	34
500-599	2	2	1	1	106	44		53	22
600-699	2	2	1	0	120	56		60	0
700-899	2	2	0	0	232	58		0	0
900-1199	3	3	0	0	267	36		0	0
1200 - 1499	4	4	1	1	44	4		11	1
1500+	4	5	1	2	4	5		1	2
Totals				WTE Total DPs including Increase	927.5	369.5	Net increase in DPs (WTEs)	163	98.25
				Net DPs increase proposed	163	98.25	Total Net Increase	261.25	

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › In light of evolving policy around inclusion, curriculum, child-protection, and anti-bullying, 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
- › Management and administrative functions, while often burdensome, cannot be mediated in isolation from the vision and values underpinning leadership
- › JMB strongly urges the Department to immediately provide for the allocation of additional deputy principal capacity across the majority of post primary schools as a matter of priority
- › 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



2. Special Educational Needs

Soundings

'We will continue to build the capacity of the education and disability sector to provide better services for children and young people and provide specialist services to those children and young people who need it'.

Programme for Government 2025

'In order to achieve inclusion in education, a top-down approach influenced by national and international policy and a rights discourse might not be sufficient; this is because inclusion processes also operate at the level of everyday social interaction where policy has less influence'

ESRI Report (2024)⁵

'While the education system aspires to be inclusive, the growth in specialist provision in the system presents a challenge to the successful realisation of this vision. The number of early intervention classes for children with autism has increased by seventeen percent since 2019'.

Department of Education Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review

1. The Policy and System Contexts

There exists a tension, acknowledged in the NCSE policy advice of last year *'An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society'*, between the radical conceptualisation of inclusion to which Ireland has committed under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and the rapidly expanding growth in special education settings. Such a policy-practice mismatch will most likely be resolved by the emergence of a much more agile model of special class provision in mainstream schools, a phenomenon which has yet to be mandated via either legislation or regulation. Indeed, school management lacks trust that the system will support schools with adequate services and resources, and remains wary of abandoning the 'contained' model wherein a special class has a set number of students, a transparent staffing allocation, and a base room with assistive technologies and other resources available to apply for. Schools fear a more agile model could well demand access by more than the current six students, an insufficient staffing allocation, more than one group assigned to a single room, and pressure to expand participation by seriously challenged students in mainstream subject classes.

Meanwhile, the government sees schools as the solution to virtually every commitment and moral obligation it carries to the families and children experiencing the distress of profound and enduring care and additional educational need. The acceleration in demand is clear from the data setting out current and projected special setting enrolment:

⁵ ['Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI](#)

Year	Students in Special School or Special Class	% of population
2017	14,988	1.55%
2018	15,670	1.62%
2019	17,011	1.76%
2000	17,859	1.85%
2021	20,124	2.09%
2022	22,479	2.33%
2023	25,058	2.60%
2024	27,460	2.85%
2025	29,807	3.09%
2026	32,052	3.32%
2027	34,157	3.54%
2028	36,089	3.74%
2029	37,829	3.92%
2030	39,370	4.08%
2031	40,711	4.22%
2032	41,862	4.34%

The reasons for this growth are complex but do not, in the words of Prof Emer Ring ‘suggest there is an epidemic of autism. It’s a no-brainer that as you broaden diagnostic criteria you will have more children with autism’.⁶

Nonetheless, the system response in terms of the number of special classes opening in the past five years, mirrors the growth in incidence and diagnoses, with:

- Almost 1,700 new special classes delivered; over 1,150 at primary level and over 540 at post primary level.
- In 2024/25 alone, over 400 new special classes were opened
- 11 new special schools have recently been established, with 5 new special schools being established in 2025
- There are now almost 28,000 children in special education placement in 2024/25.

In light of these developments, the tensions in the system-school interface were articulated by the Chief Inspector’s observation that:

‘While these legislative and policy commitments demonstrate an aspiration towards an inclusive system, the vision of an inclusive education system may be easier to formulate in legislation than it is to enact in practice’⁷

Thus, the school context is key.

6 <https://www.irishtimes.com/health/your-family/2024/11/24/autism-why-are-so-many-children-being-diagnosed-these-days/>

7 <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/9e604-the-department-of-education-inspectorate-report-2021-2023-and-thematic-review/>

2. The School Context

In our sector, voluntary secondary schools are already 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. That said, the successful achievement of our national ambitions around inclusion cannot be realised until the capacity bottlenecks at school level are eliminated. The top four limiting factors are:

1. School Leadership and Management Capacity
2. Special Education Teacher Capacity
3. Special Educational Needs Coordination Capacity, and,
4. Infrastructural Capacity

Limiting Factor 1: School Leadership and Management Capacity

The Chief Inspector's Report of 2016-2020 made the following observations of contemporary school leadership:

- › Inspection findings show that clear communication practices and strong cultures of collaboration lie at the heart of effective schools
- › Effective leaders and managers communicate well and demonstrate a strong commitment to improving the quality of provision for learners
- › Those in leadership and management positions in schools need to place a more substantial focus on the leadership of teaching and learning

That final observation represents the professional instinct of every principal in the state, but it equally goes to the heart of the daily dilemma of the nation's 4,000 apex school leaders i.e., the system itself stops principals effectively undertaking the core duty the system demands of principals.

It is crystal clear that the time for empowered, enabled, resourced, and liberated school leadership has come. It is no longer acceptable that a school principal remains overwhelmed by administrative and other non-core workloads (such as administering the free book scheme, management of cleaners, buildings maintenance etc.) to the detriment of her or his key role as the leader of learning. We acknowledge and welcome the provision of additional deputy principals in larger schools in recent times, which represents a cost-effective model of enhancing the leadership base in our schools. We have relied on a single person at the neck of that responsibility hourglass for far too long. 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 line management, reporting structures, communication pathways etc.

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?

The limit of responsibility capacity has, in the view of the JMB, already been breached.

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 SNAs. As set out earlier 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.

Anything else is tinkering.

Limiting Factor 2: Special Education Teacher Capacity

Special Education Teachers (SETs) represent a highly motivated subset of the teaching workforce whose professional identity and standing are rightfully increasing across schools and system alike.

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. SNAs equally require a well-structured and state funded model of professional learning, particularly as their role evolves in the post-primary setting.

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.

In terms of teacher training and development for the non-specialist staff in relation to SEN expertise, it goes without saying that school communities require opportunities for school-wide awareness raising and TPL interventions relevant to areas such as differentiated teaching and assessment, understanding cognitive capacity test outcomes, communicating with parents, multiple intelligences, behaviour management, autism-specific professional learning, and system knowledge in relation to special needs.

We must first, however, address the factors that our principals have identified as hindering the implementation of effective whole-school special education strategies in our schools:

- › The majority of principals cite lack of time as the greatest restraint
- › 'Time' as set out in the requirements below, must be provided on the basis that tuition time remains protected
- › Lack of provision of collaboration time for the necessary in-school meetings involved, teacher professional learning, team teaching, special needs planning, and student support planning particularly in relation to classroom teachers' engagement with their SET colleagues on specific students' needs
- › Lack of coordination time and personnel to invest in a fit-for-purpose communication structure keeping all staff updated and in contact with special education developments across the school
- › Department approval for in-school or clustered, all-staff, professional learning to support the implementation of inclusive education, delivered on school closure days rather than the current piecemeal, withdrawal model for which substitute teaching cannot be accessed

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- › There are calls from the teacher unions for the already-reduced 'Croke Park hours' to be further reduced. The erosion of this vital time for collaboration in small groups needs to be arrested, as time for collaboration outside of tuition time must be preserved for this much needed collaborative work
 - › There is a need for ongoing planning around the SNA workforce at both national and school levels to meet the needs of post primary students and which will be radically different to the narrowly focussed job description in place at primary

The good news about this list of hindrances is that they are soluble and don't include lack of motivation. A Department supported approach to investing in, and re-energising schools' mental health, behaviour management, and special education provisions will do much to attack the incoherence characterising current disassociated and under-resourced interventions.

Limiting Factor 3: Special Educational Needs Coordination Capacity

As a matter of urgency, government must make distinct provision for 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 position is supported by the NCSE. Principals' feedback has emphatically asserted the following points:

1. There is absolute unanimity that every school's special needs core team must have dedicated coordination time, as set out in the joint management bodies' submission of 2024
2. Continuing to find coordination time from within the resource-hours allocation to students is widely seen as unethical and inefficient
3. Such coordination time must not be comprehended solely as part of the 21:20 teaching week as the work is of a different nature with different boundaries to class contact time
4. There is no clarity or advice on the proportion of hours which should be dedicated for SEN coordination activities or the team-based nature of this work
5. Principals report being unable to keep an individual SENCO in the role for any extended length of time, due to role expansion, admin overload and lack of time. The role requires reframing in terms of being the responsibility of a core team
6. Post-primary schools are given no time for duties in their posts of responsibility, other than for Programme Coordinator or Adult Ed.
7. Principals agree that SENCO time should be given to the school as a flexible but adequate quantum of hours each year

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 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).

Additional core tasks include:

- › Design, development and leadership of the day-to-day implementation of the school’s Inclusion policy – i.e., coordination of the support provided to students with identified and/ or diagnosed additional needs to improve their outcomes.
- › Development and maintenance of professional, positive, and productive relationships with students, parents/ caregivers and all external agencies as required (e.g., NCSE, SENOs, NEPS, SLT, OT, CAMHS).
- › Management and leadership of the SEN Department, including management of SNAs in collaboration with the Principal/ Deputy Principal.
- › Timetabling of additional support in collaboration with Senior Leadership Team (SLT) with availability in June and August to support schoolwide planning.
- › Teaching mainstream classes as required by the school.
- › Establishment and curation of digital databases to support dissemination of student profile data.
- › Collaborative engagement with Guidance Counsellors in school-based identification of need involving:
- › School-wide profiling of need.
- › Assessment: evidence informed planning & resource allocation, including processing of including RACE, DARE and Irish exemptions.
- › Dissemination of profiles, requiring systems, and digital literacy skills.
- › Cyclical Review and Evaluation (School Self Evaluation, Provision Mapping).
- › Equal partnership with parents/ caregivers and students and SENCO availability to meet with parents outside of school hours.
- › Advocacy for students; amplifying students’ voices in decision-making.
- › Partnership approach to support transition planning (including school visits in June) from primary to post primary and post-school.
- › Co-ordinating data gathering, screening, and testing.
- › Taking a lead role in making arrangements for planning, implementation and review of student support plans, and availability to engage with this work outside of scheduled term times if necessary.
- › Supporting the communication of information regarding students’ needs to subject teachers, form tutors and year-heads.
- › Liaising with other agencies.
- › Assisting in programme planning.
- › Researching new programmes and options.

To meet such an expansion in responsibility, we are seeking an additional 10 per cent 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:

Ring-Fenced Allocation of Hours for Leadership and Coordination of SEN			
Total SET Allocation to Post primary Schools 2023-2024*	10% Ring-fenced Allocation for Leadership and Coordination	WTE Equivalent Posts	Approximate cost to Exchequer**
101,146	10,115	460 WTE Posts	€32.26 million (based on cost of 1 WTE @ €70,140)

* 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 outlined in Section 3 across the team and recognises the specialist skills, knowledge and competencies required of SETs to undertake this work.

Limiting Factor 4: Infrastructural Capacity

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. SEN expansion aside, projections show that we can expect a continuing increase in enrolments at second level up to 2026 of at least 84,000 students. JMB is concerned that with exponentially increasing building costs, a fall-off in parties responding to calls for tenders, even the targets of the current Six Year Plan and the National Development Plan will not be met.

In this context, the Department, and government as a whole, must address the following three roadblocks facing both system and school in terms of creating accommodation for special classes:

1. Budgetary Limitation

The most frequently cited argument adopted by senior Department officials and relevant agencies is that DPER has a default 'No' position on additional capital spending and, in spite of genuine attempts to access such funding for schools, the year-on-year education vote will not be sufficient to remotely meet demand.

This position therefore requires a whole-of-government response. The Programme for Government sets out two specific commitments which will require capital release from DPER and the Department of Finance in the 2026 Budget:

The Government will:

- *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.*
- *We will streamline the delivery of modular accommodation for special classes and special schools so that it is in place in advance of the school year.*

This second aspiration pinpoints the second roadblock.

2. Lack of Availability of Modular Accommodation

While the quality and standard of modular accommodation has 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 for delivery.

Such a bottleneck requires government to source modularised accommodation internationally and not rely on native suppliers. It also demands a high degree of forward planning, which was called for in last year's Ombudsman for Children's⁸ report:

According to the Department, if there is no available accommodation capacity in an area, accelerated delivery of new special class accommodation could be achieved by using the Department's Modular Accommodation Framework [and] where appropriate and feasible, the special class facilities are provided within the existing school accommodation and the displaced mainstream classrooms are located in the new modular accommodation.

The OCO recommends that the Department publish, as a matter of priority, a plan for ensuring that there are sufficient school places in the short to medium term to meet the forecasted needs of children with SEN within their local communities.

JMB is aware that the NCSE and the Department's Planning and Building Unit have made considerable progress in developing and implementing a comprehensive forward planning model, has identified 'hotspots' of demand-availability mismatch, engaged closely with schools and patrons, and enhanced data sharing and strategic planning of specialist placements. While we encourage school management to support and cooperate with NCSE in this endeavour, we equally urge the Department to develop a multi-year budgeting process to allow forward planning to be reliably resourced.

3. Complex Project Management and Grant Access

JMB welcomes the improved access to grant aid as set out in Circular 0080/2024. Such streamlined access, however, is limited to start-up costs and small-scale re-purposing works. Schools requiring more significant works relating to the opening of a new special class in existing accommodation will require to have a more 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

⁸ <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2024/09/OCO-Plan-for-Places-Two-Year-Update-2024.pdf>

the deferral in 2023 of the ICT grant to mitigate a shortfall in such capital spending points to a need for more realistic investment by government in line with forecasted demand.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › JMB wishes to widen the conversation around SEN team coordination to a broader discussion around senior level leadership for learning, curriculum access for all, and the systems knowledge required to give effect to national policy
- › Our contention is that the aforementioned systems-level knowledge, authority, and agency at school level can best be mediated by a deputy principal rather than 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 an additional 10 per cent 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 a multi-annual commitment to major capital release from DPER and the Department of Finance in the 2026 Budget
- › JMB is calling for a significant expansion of access to funded professional learning opportunities, and in particular to post-graduate diploma programmes in special education
- › 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



3. The Education Enterprise: Curriculum Change and Teacher Supply

Soundings

'Reform of the Senior Cycle brings both opportunities and challenges for Junior Cycle. On the one hand, it will likely create greater acceptance of the Framework for Junior Cycle as the focus on skills development and the pedagogies employed will have greater relevance at Senior Cycle. On the other hand, it also has the potential to strengthen the subservient relationship that exists between the two programmes'

Framework for Junior Cycle research study – UL Final Report

'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'

ESRI Report (2024)⁹

'In terms of understanding, addressing and evaluating teacher supply, both pipeline and experiences models are required, that is, to encompass both the numerical entry and exit data (pipeline) along with data on teachers' perceptions of their experience and conditions of employment (experiences)'

Teachers' Professional Journeys during the first decade; longitudinal study

Senior Cycle Redevelopment

Curriculum development at national level is characterised by having a lag-phase wherein the development and consultation work continues 'behind the scenes' for some years but then emerges into schools for implementation in an apparently short timeframe. We are currently at this post lag-phase with senior cycle and experiencing newly developed curriculum specifications, assessment methodologies, state examination requirements, and teacher professional learning roll-out at a pace and depth never before seen in Irish education.

At the launch of the Junior Cycle Framework in 2015, the then Minister Ruairi Quinn said '... make no mistake, education is profoundly political' and, in this respect, senior cycle redevelopment has been no different. In relation to senior cycle change, the 'acceleration', explicitly sought by the then Minister led to an inflationary period of curriculum development and now, in 2025/26, a high intensity level of demand at school level, accelerating, in parallel, every school's requirement for a range of capacity building and enhancement measures so they can deliver on the transformation.

Thus, Michael Fullan's maxim that 'effective educators attack incoherence' presents a system-level challenge to both the political and policy spheres, particularly in terms of the dynamics of change-

⁹ ['Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI](#)

management, pacing, alignment with other policy rollout, and the enhancement of senior leadership capacity to implement it all.

In terms of attacking the mismatch between politically driven change, policy framing of such reforms, and the capacity of schools to deliver, JMB is proposing a return to the establishment of an Education Research and Policy Section within the Department, originally set out in the Programme for Government in 2020:

We will:

Establish a new Education Research and Policy Section within the Department tasked with ensuring that education policy development in Ireland is informed by a strong evidence base, is outcomes focused, and cognisant of best international practices.

Indeed, JMB has long argued for precisely such a forum in one submission after another:

We need someone at the 'top' of the education policy-making pyramid to have the complete picture. At present the Department is heavily siloed. One section doesn't speak with the other on an effective basis. In fact, the only people in the country who operate at the centre of the nexus of policy-overload are our principals, who must implement everything. To support a more realistic and grounded policy framework, JMB urges the Department to develop a model of structured input from people with school management experience and to ensure that every major decision is 'road-tested' by those charged with its implementation. The lack of inspectors with school management experience is a case in point. The Department should use the secondment process, with retained allowances, to boost its school-management perspective and this will represent a small amount of money well spent.

Ministers are, of their role, transitory. A key strategic priority for the Department must be to put in place an oversight structure with both a mandate and authority to take an overall view of policy and practice developments and attack both the incoherence and overload impacting on our schools. Its primary function must be to map system capacity against policy priority. We cannot have 'joined-up thinking' if no-one is responsible for doing this thinking. If it is everyone's responsibility, it is no-one's responsibility.

It was, however, clear from the initial proposal that this entity would be underpinned by evidence-informed decision-making. This philosophy is, of course, virtually universal in terms of validating outputs by contemporary policymakers but it is equally important that the proposed Section would not suffer from the fundamental flaw of adopting a too-narrow view of what constitutes evidence. Not all the problems of teachers and teaching are technical in nature and thus not all are open to solution by research. Given the socially complex character of the school world, the best educators make judgements rather than following rules. They base their practices on four grounds:

- Tradition (how it has always been done)
- Prejudice (how I like it done)
- Dogma (this is the 'right' way to do it), and,
- Ideology (as required by the current orthodoxy)

This is not an argument for not putting professional decision-making to the evidential test. Rather, JMB, while proposing a return to this new structure, urges an expansion of its brief, a reconsideration of its philosophical underpinnings and a much wider composition in terms of stakeholder engagement.

Meanwhile, in terms of impact, our schools will be required to implement the following significant measures at senior cycle over the next two years:

The introduction of Tranche 1 Leaving Certificate subjects, including two new newly developed subjects in September 2025:

- › Ancient Greek
- › Arabic
- › Biology
- › Business
- › Chemistry
- › Climate Action and Sustainable Development
- › Drama, Film and Theatre Studies
- › Latin
- › Physics

From September 2026, the suite of Tranche 2 subjects to be implemented will include:

- › Accounting
- › Construction Studies
- › Engineering
- › English
- › Geography
- › LCVP Link Modules, and,
- › Physical Education

Pressure on principals to erode tuition time to provide teacher release for professional learning, textbook changes, timetabling pressures on an already overcrowded curriculum and its option lines, communication with students and parents, and guidance demands will be compounded by the impact of successive waves of Additional Assessment Components (AACs).

Meanwhile, ongoing leadership, guidance, and planning will be required to unpack the professional learning delivered by Oide in order to embed deep change at school level or we risk superficial, transactional reform as opposed to the intended cultural and pedagogical transformation of teaching and learning.

In terms of the practical implications for school leaders, the following demands will require to be met:

(a) Strategic Implementation:

- › Leaders must **develop structured plans** to integrate Oide's training into school policies and daily practice.
- › Allocate time for **collaborative reflection** on how training aligns with the school's vision and improvement goals.

(b) Sustained Professional Development:

- › Move beyond one-off training sessions by embedding **ongoing coaching, mentoring, and follow-up support** for staff.
- › Create opportunities for **peer learning, professional discussions, and lesson study** to ensure continuous engagement.

(c) Cultural and Pedagogical Shift:

- › Foster an environment where teachers feel empowered to **experiment with new methods** and reflect on their practice.
- › 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, using **student outcomes and teacher feedback** 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 training translates into daily teaching and learning practices**.

(f) Resource Allocation:

- › Ensure that teachers have **time, materials, and support** to effectively implement what they have learned.
- › Integrate professional learning into **school structures, timetables, and development plans** rather than treating it as an add-on.

By taking these steps, school leaders can **lead meaningful change** rather than allowing professional learning to become a transactional process with little lasting impact.

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.

Beyond the demands of subject specification renewal, a concurrent set of programme redevelopments will also impact on schools and demand appropriate levels of leadership to be implemented. These include:

Review and reform of each school's Transition Year Programme in line with the new Programme Statement.

- › Principals have consistently identified Programme Coordination as a key limiting factor in terms of review and renewal of their TY provision. The current model of programme coordinator post of responsibility no longer meets the demands of significantly expanding access to Community, Life and Work Studies (formerly LCVP), and programme flexibility within LCA in relation to Maths and MFL.

Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes at Senior Cycle

- › 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.

- Furthermore, the integration of students following L2LPs into some mainstream classes will be complex and require appropriate levels of leadership to enact appropriately

Social, Personal, and Health Education carries with it a range of opportunities and challenges.

- Chief among the challenges at senior cycle in particular are the need to establish a new degree of confidence amongst teachers of SPHE in the face of a shifting and dynamic background of social developments impacting on the lives of young people; high calibre professional learning opportunities for teachers, current and potential; policy level guidance on managing an increasing number of withdrawals from the subject by parents and by students over 18 years; a revised set of guidelines and templates to support schools in reviewing and updating their RSE policies; and a level of SPHE coordination time in which teachers and senior leaders can plan for, and monitor, SPHE implementation across the school.

Parents are, of course, central in terms of supporting appropriate decision-making around subjects and programme choices and the impact of multiple, concurrent, and accelerated change at senior cycle will demand the highest degree of effective communication between school and family. The failure to achieve this at the reform of junior cycle cannot be allowed to be repeated in the current context and the Department apparently realises that the principal and deputy principal(s) are central to this communication task. What must follow, however, is a set of enabling measures to ensure our apex leaders are given the time and development opportunities to confidently convey the rationale for change, its implementation dynamics, and assessment strategies to parents, and indeed the entire school community.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **High levels of anxiety are being reported by principals in terms of the capacity of their school structures to comprehend and comply with mandated change at senior cycle. This impacts particularly on the key limiting factor: Time, for:**
 - scheduling of more flexible LCA and Community, Life and Work Studies programmes
 - reviewing and implementing new Transition Year programmes
 - implementing the revised SPHE specification and its associated policy development requirement
 - finding time for connections with the work of work and enterprise
 - finding time for additional assessment components
 - finding time for senior cycle free textbook provision
- **Each of these areas represents a significant stressor on the school community and must be supported by realistic expectations and additional staffing capacity across our school sector**
- **In the context of accelerated and cumulative policy change, 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 to mitigate such an avoidable outcome**

The Junior Cycle Framework

Parallel to this development, the junior cycle framework continues to embed, having both stalled and been adjusted in light of the pandemic school closures. It's axiomatic that 'research makes the familiar look strange' and this is particularly true of the longitudinal study carried out by the University of Limerick into the impact of the framework. Key messages in its final report will come as no surprise to school leaders and teachers:

- › 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
- › 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

Meanwhile, the Inspectorate views junior cycle redevelopment, and CBAs in particular, in a more positive light:

'A majority of teachers and students were positive with regard to their experiences of CBAs. There was a recognition that CBAs provided an opportunity to affirm development in competencies that are not assessed in traditional terminal examinations. Students highlighted the positive impact that CBAs had on their research and presentation skills, and how working on CBAs supported their development as independent learners'¹⁰

To further compound the picture, last year's 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, even on the question of the efficacy of CBAs alone, there exists a spectrum of evidence and, again, coherence must be brought to bear on the system-level response in light of the UL final report. More widely, 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. Key concerns emerging in the ESRI report of 2024 include:

- › Teachers express concerns about the capacity of the Junior Cycle terminal assessment to allow students to demonstrate their learning and accurately measure it

¹⁰ Department of Education Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review

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- › Concerns are being raised about 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.

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
- › The Department should expand the provision of high-quality professional learning and post-graduate development opportunities for teachers in SPHE and in RSE

Teacher Supply

While many countries are experiencing a shortage in teacher supply, the situation in Ireland is compounded by a crisis in the availability of accommodation and hence the disproportionate effect on schools in our larger cities and those serving disadvantaged communities.

JMB is well aware of the raft of actions currently being undertaken by the Department and its agencies, but the national narrative points to a failure to achieve real progress:

*'There is little sign that the political parties are greatly exercised by the subject of teacher supply. The programme for government is vague on the topic and contains no definite proposal, much less a clear commitment to actually address the issue. Moreover, the problem at post-primary level is more complex; it's not just a question of the overall supply of teachers but one of ensuring that there is a sufficient number of qualified teachers in the various subject areas. Thus, the crisis endures and our younger citizens continue to be taught by unqualified personnel at both primary and post-primary level. Surely they are entitled to better'*¹¹

Prof Judith Harford and Dr Brian Fleming UCD School of Education

What is needed at this time is a change in our thinking. Both Minister McEntee and her predecessor, then Minister Joe McHugh made a point of meeting in person with teachers trained in Ireland and working in Australia and the Gulf States respectively. Such face-to-face encounters enhance understanding on both sides and inevitably point to the importance of comprehending experiential factors alongside pipeline factors. This concept, framed in a paper on Teachers Professional Journeys¹², argues:

*'... the challenges faced in any given jurisdiction has its own particular dynamics based on the history and traditions of schooling, teacher education and labour market in given national contexts. It is important to explicitly distinguish between widely used yet significantly different framings/models of teacher supply. Here, we note two key dimensions, both essential and both used though sometimes not explicitly framed as such: (a) **pipeline models** which have an exclusive numerical focus on entry and exit to the teaching profession, and (b) **pipeline + experiences models** which encompass both the numerical entry and exit data along with data on teachers' perceptions of their experience and conditions of employment'*

It is the experience of teaching that emerges as the critical factor in conversations with NQTs at home and abroad and this is supported by international evidence as set out in an OECD working paper on Teacher Wellbeing¹³:

'The share of teachers who believe that teaching is a valued profession in their country is a good predictor of the attractiveness of the profession, as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results highlighted that the most successful education systems were those where society values teachers the most. In addition, PISA results showed that teachers who wanted to pursue a career in the teaching profession tend to report higher job satisfaction, hence the attractiveness of the profession is important in attracting new candidates and retaining them in their jobs'.

Thus, every citizen has a role to play in valuing and affirming the nation's teachers. At school level, our principals and deputy principals are acutely aware of the wellbeing and job satisfaction factors that

¹¹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2025/02/24/two-issues-on-helen-mcentees-desk-will-provide-an-early-clue-to-her-ambitions-as-minister-for-education/>

¹² Conway, P. F., Leavy, A., Smyth, E., Calderon, A., Fitzgerald, J., Hourigan, M., & NiChroinin, D. (2024). Teachers' Professional Journeys during the first decade longitudinal study: Reviews of literature: Report No.1

¹³ <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/c36fc9d3-en>

influence retention, and it is the role of the Department and its agencies to play their part in changing the narrative that the grass is greener elsewhere. Such teacher wellbeing factors include:

Cognitive Wellbeing

This relates to self-efficacy which represents teachers' beliefs in their abilities to perform, particularly in challenging school settings. These beliefs influence how much effort people put in, how long they will persist in the face of obstacles, how resilient they are in dealing with failures, and how much stress or depression they experience in coping with demanding situations.

Subjective/Affective Wellbeing

This relates to good mental states, including all of the various evaluations, positive and negative, that people make of their lives and the affective reactions of people to their experiences.

Physical and Mental Wellbeing

We know that difficult working conditions and high levels of stress can alter good health, and the literature confirms that teachers suffer more psychosomatic disorders than other occupational groups¹⁴. Good or bad physical wellbeing for teachers can be measured through the presence or absence of psychosomatic complaints including effects on several systems of the body:

- › the nervous system (i.e. release of adrenaline and cortisol)
- › the musculoskeletal system (i.e. migraines, headache and tensions in the muscles)
- › the respiratory system (i.e. rapid breathing or hyperventilation)
- › the cardiovascular system (i.e. elevations in blood pressure and heart rate), and,
- › the gastrointestinal system (i.e. self-reported symptoms such as stomach pains)

Social Wellbeing

Social wellbeing refers to the quality and depth of social interactions with a range of stakeholders, including young people in their classrooms, their parents, professionals including colleagues, peers, principals, support staff, consultants and specialised staff like psychologists, as well as with the local community in which the school is situated and where teachers may live. Teachers who feel supported by their colleagues and principals usually have a higher sense of general professional wellbeing, they experience greater self-efficacy, less pressure at work, have a more pupil-centred orientation and are also usually better equipped to deal with external pressures

Thus, a change of focus is required in terms of the longer-term sustainability of the profession and a focus on teacher wellbeing as much as that of their students. In this respect, JMB urges the Department to deploy the OECD Teacher Wellbeing questionnaire in the next round of PISA tests. The data from this instrument would allow for identification of the adverse factors at play within the system and a better remediation of some of the experience challenges entering the national narrative.

Of course, pipeline factors will always remain a challenge and the Department's ever-improving data on the post-primary teaching workforce continues to support evidence-informed decision making. However, a key bottleneck in the throughput of initial teachers lies in the two-year post-graduate model of teacher

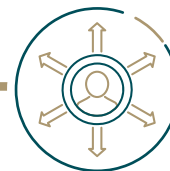
¹⁴ Scheuch, K., E. Haufe and R. Seibt (2015), "Teachers' Health", Deutsches Ärzteblatt Online, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3238/arztebl.2015.0347>.

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.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **The two-year PME programme must 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**
- **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**



4. Fit for Purpose Staffing Allocations

Soundings

'We are fortunate in Ireland to have some of the best schools in the world, supported by excellent staff and voluntary boards of management. These schools provide a rich, nurturing and supportive environment in which students can learn and grow. We want to support this work by ensuring that schools are adequately funded and supported to achieve their ambitions'

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)¹⁵

'There is a lack of support available for mental health issues – it's at crisis levels in schools. [The school has a] specific guidance counsellor and chaplain but could do with a full-time qualified therapist. The chaplain is privately funded. The Department don't fund this role in voluntary schools but do in community schools': *Principal, fee-charging school*

ESRI Report (2024)¹⁶

Restoring the Pupil-Teacher Ratio

In the medium to long term, demographic and other trends point to an easing of the teacher supply crisis in the years ahead, opening the way for a long-awaited reduction in the post-primary pupil-teacher ratio to be allocated-for and staffed.

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'*.

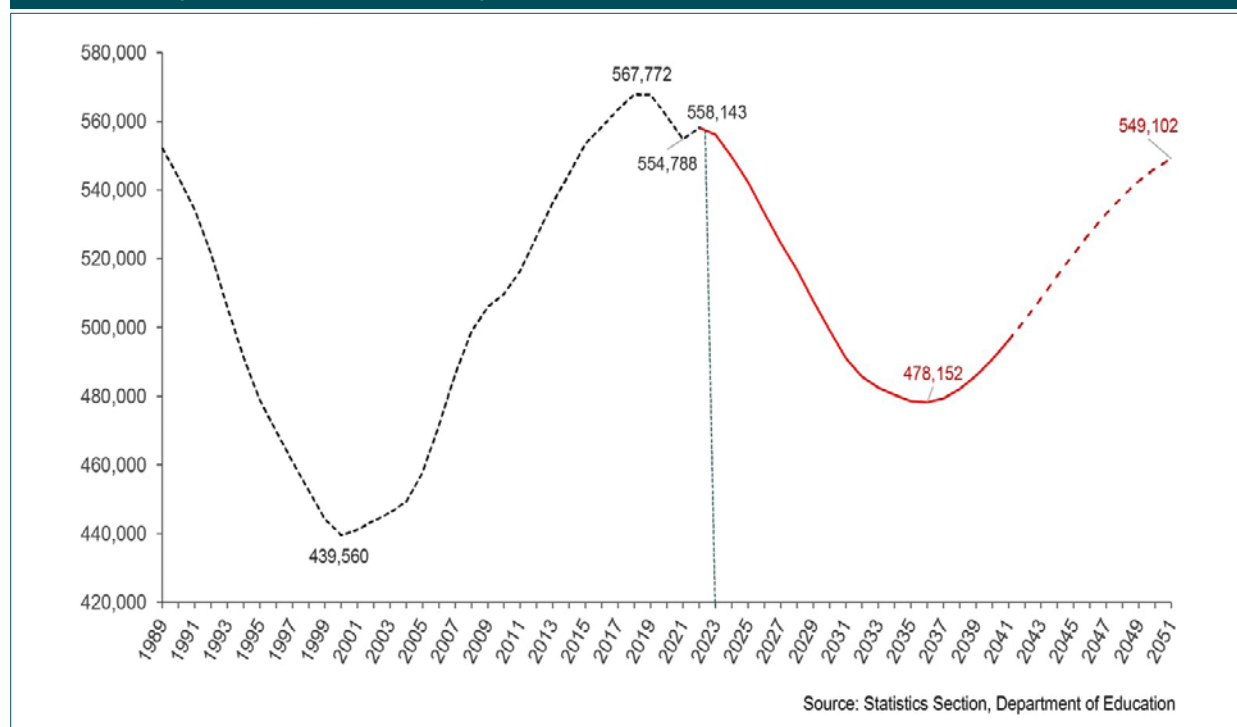
While such investment at primary level is long overdue, the stark absence of any reference to equivalent treatment at post-primary level is hugely concerning. In particular, current policy change at senior cycle, for example in relation to broadening participation in Transition Year and the new LCVP, 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.

¹⁵ ['Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI](#)

¹⁶ ['Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI](#)

The drop in projected primary enrolments of almost 100,000 pupils over the next decade will, given the PTR change at that level, retain teachers and allow for the successful implementation of the new Primary Curriculum Framework:

Actual and projected enrolments in primary schools, 1989-2051



The exact same situation applies at post-primary as enrolment figures move past their peak. The subject-specialist nature of secondary school staffing of course adds complexity to the picture, but government must not see enrolment trends as a ‘demographic dividend’ – a reduction in second-level PTR would simply begin to restore staffing to pre-financial crash 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 was established during the financial emergency.

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.

If the pandemic-related school closures begun in March 2020 proved anything, it is the centrality of the teacher-student relationship that makes all the difference in the enterprise of the school. Even the most engaged, resourced, and supported student cannot form an educative relationship with a screen. Thus, the pupil teacher ratio for schools in the Free Education sector must 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

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.

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.

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 post 'Celtic Tiger' economic crash and to support a continuing recovery in terms of the learning loss experienced by this generation of students
- › 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.



5. Investment and Funding of Schools

Soundings

'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. The average amount of voluntary contributions this year decreased slightly for both primary and secondary school parents, perhaps reflecting the increase in the capitation grant in Budget 2024'.¹⁷

The Real Cost of School in 2024, Barnardos, (2024)

'A number of areas of investment have been criticised as lacking policy rigour and adequate investment: the school building programme has been argued to be poorly funded, and funding to support the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools was not provided in the school year 2022-23'

ESRI Report (2024)¹⁸

'Outside of running costs, schools highlighted that voluntary contributions are viewed as a key enabler of autonomy for schools to pursue activities and programmes that are not funded by Departmental grants'

What is Needed to End Voluntary Contributions? SVP (2023)

1. Spending on Education

The Department'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%. Nonetheless, the latest edition of the OECD's Education at a Glance¹⁹ ranks Ireland as being last out of 34 countries for investment in second-level education as a proportion of country's GDP.

Whatever the rubric, the Department must make the strongest case for 2025 government policy demand to be matched with the Budget 2026 resourcing required to implement it. In seeking to build a world-class education system, the Programme for Government sets out its ambition thus:

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.

¹⁷ <https://www.barnardos.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Barnardos-Back-to-School-2024-Full-Report.pdf>

¹⁸ 'Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI

¹⁹ https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

Last year's 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 risk is that government will see this education-on-a-shoestring model as continuing to remain successful in the future. 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.

It is the duty of government to manage the state's resources on behalf of the people in accordance with their values and to prioritise the vulnerable, the young and the nation's future. We have done this before:

'We are not a nation which can deploy substantial financial resources. We must allocate resources as priorities demand. Productive investment must come first. Investment in education must get priority for it is a form of productive investment which is vital not only to our future economic development but to the entire national fabric of the growing nation'

Donogh O'Malley, 10th September 1966²⁰

We must replicate many of the more courageous and visionary actions of previous generations and prioritise investment in education as a strategic good, particularly under the challenging global financial conditions we are likely to experience in light of emerging threats to foreign direct investment.

2. Underfunding and the Need for Voluntary Contributions

The requirement for voluntary secondary schools to uniquely source 30% of their day-to-day funding from their families and communities represents perhaps the longest-running failure of the state to abide by a core founding intention of the Republic, that of 'cherishing all the children of the nation equally'. 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

²⁰ Irish Educational Documents, Volume 2 edited by Áine Hyland, Kenneth Milne (Dublin, 1992)

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.²¹

'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 all but gone. As energy 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.

Indeed, current and projected inflationary pressures are already impacting on school budgets and the JMB urges the immediate index-linking of all capitation grants to allow schools to effectively manage their finances.

Certainty on the timing of grants continues to be a very big problem. Financial planning involves managing cash flow and the lack of certainty on the timing of payments is causing stress for school leaders. The fact that Capitation has not been adjusted for inflation represents an avoidable structural problem and dependence on temporary funding to mitigate inflationary pressures undermines financial stability and increases the pressures on fund raising and parental payments.

The fact is that all voluntary secondary schools operate under severe funding restrictions and are acutely aware that the families they serve are equally not immune to financial pressures. Under a three-year policy to be agreed at government level, the Minister could eliminate the need for schools in our sector to seek voluntary contributions from families, a measure which would immediately and significantly alleviate the pressures on all concerned.

There will, of course, be many competing priorities in the forthcoming government Budget. Equalisation of funding across all school communities and sectors must be one of them. The Programme for Government commits to:

'Increase capitation funding to schools of all types to ensure that schools can meet the elevated day-to-day running costs and reduce the financial burden on families'

Such across-the-board modest increases in school income, while welcome, continue to ignore the expenditure side which remains significantly higher in the voluntary secondary sector and thus such schools will continue to rely heavily on direct contributions from parents. According to a patron body recent analysis of year-end (YE) 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 research²², recent data and conclusions from Grant Thornton²³, Barnardos and St Vincent DePaul, provide ample evidence of the impact of

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

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

23 <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>

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.²⁴

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'*
- › *'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'²⁵*

A commencement must now be made to address the inequitable funding of schools in the Voluntary Secondary sector by completing the Equalisation process already conceded²⁶ 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.

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
- › 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 such schools

²⁴ <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>

²⁵ https://www.svp.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Closing-the-Gap_-What-is-needed-to-end-Voluntary-Contributions_-Report-2023.pdf

²⁶ [School Funding – Tuesday, 7 Nov 2017 – Parliamentary Questions \(32nd Dáil\) – Houses of the Oireachtas](#)



6. Including All

Soundings

Key concerns raised by respondents include a lack of transparency in resource allocation, inadequate classroom facilities, and a lingering stigma associated with DEIS schools. Teachers reported experiencing heavy workloads due to diverse classroom needs and significant administrative burdens. While many teachers expressed a sense of fulfilment in their roles, particularly in supporting students, they also highlighted the need for systemic reforms including enhanced social, behavioural and mental health supports, and a more transparent and equitable distribution of resources'

Educators' Perspectives on the Challenges, Successes and Opportunities of the DEIS Programme, TUI (2025)

'Broader issues remain for schools not benefiting from the DEIS programme, but serving very diverse school populations. Key support staff like School Completion Programme officer or Home-School-Community Liaison officers and access to programmes like the free school meals programme are not currently available to non-DEIS schools. There are, however, many students who would benefit from these supports in most non-DEIS schools'

ESRI Report (2024)²⁷

'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

The Minister's commitment to tackling educational disadvantage translates into two important actions this year:

- The introduction of a DEIS plus scheme, aligning with the Programme for Government commitment to support schools with the highest levels of disadvantage, and,
- The publication of a new DEIS plan during 2025

JMB will continue to engage at the highest level with these developments and will press for actions around the most significant challenges facing management in schools within the DEIS Programme.

²⁷ ['Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education | ESRI](#)

Since the introduction of the DEIS programme, the JMB has annually provided seminars for our, now, 70 voluntary secondary schools within the DEIS Programme. Principals, deputies, HSCL, SCP, Guidance and other teaching staff have come together to be informed of policy and evaluation findings as well as to share good practice in areas of mutual interest. Feedback from participants in our JMB DEIS Seminars points to a number of areas of common experience.

Schools serving disadvantaged communities are glad to be included in the DEIS programme and engage with energy and good faith in its provisions and demands. They equally agree, however, 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. Children 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. Participants at our seminars 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.

Anecdotal evidence from our principals would suggest that investment in the development of leadership capacity – existing and prospective – within DEIS schools must become a priority. A key element of our seminars 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, in subsequent evaluations, 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.

A perennial theme among DEIS educators centres on their own morale. Nobody seems to thank them. One instrumentalist, accountability-driven, value-for-money evaluation after another, fails to acknowledge the personal investment made by school leaders in particular and their whole-school teams in general. Nobody works in a disadvantaged setting because it’s easier or pays better. The adults in every DEIS school not alone do ‘God’s agenda’ in terms of going the extra mile for the young people in their care but also save the State many millions of Euro each year in terms of what doesn’t happen because of their work. It is time to acknowledge the wonderful frontline personnel in our DEIS schools publicly and repeatedly, and to affirm the unseen miracles they perform every working day.

JMB affirms the principle of subsidiarity in which the optimal intervention strategies for any school are best left to that school to develop and implement. In this respect, the SSE framework (which schools in the DEIS programme are already adept-at) offers much scope for evidence-based action at school level. It is our position that schools should be trusted, supported but ‘left alone’ to employ the strategies they see fit for purpose locally and for the Department to remove the limiting factors of resourcing and leadership development which impede their progress.

The JMB affirms the government's direction of travel in providing a degree of tapering of supports for schools rather than a sharp withdrawal below the specified cut-off. JMB supports such a proposal and also seeks to have comprehended those larger schools with high absolute numbers of disadvantaged students, as opposed to proportion. This is not to deny the existence or impact of the 'multiplier effect'. What, in all justice, is required is a good-faith attempt to map resourcing against need, even though this will emerge as being more complex than heretofore. There is nothing as unequal as equal treatment. The social map of Ireland has been transformed by the pandemic. A 'new poor' has emerged and they don't necessarily have medical cards; they are struggling to keep their homes or pay high rents, but they prioritise education for their children and any new roll-out of provision must take cognisance of these realities.

Establishing a new model of inclusion in school-based strategies to mitigate disadvantage will, in the first instance, demand we listen to those school communities themselves, whether currently in DEIS or excluded. There is a wealth of accumulated experience and wisdom in our schools which will require to be factored into any subsequent model of provision. We look forward to engaging positively with the Department on the aims of the Programme for government and commend the Minister on her openness to the development of new strategies for the new social and educational landscapes now prevailing in our country.

The impact on schools of having to seek voluntary contributions from families has been discussed separately in this submission. It is the JMB position that school communities and the families they serve share a common mission, that of educating and enriching the lives of the young people in their care. This enterprise relies on a social-democratic and, indeed, morally founded relationship which all parties, including the state, take for granted at their peril. Our contention is that aside from the school-level impacts of having to collect voluntary contributions from their families, the relationship damage caused by this wholly avoidable requirement is very real and can have negative effects on all partners and their sense of common moral purpose.

The extension of the Book Scheme across all phases of post primary is, of course, a welcome development in terms of reducing the cost burden of schooling on families. We also welcome the structure of the scheme which enables schools to use the grant to significantly reduce the costs of additional education resources previously paid for by parents. That said, school management continues to have concerns around the practicalities of implementation and the consequences of a decision to map a primary school model onto a quite different landscape at post primary.

It is essential that the Department understands that for a scheme to run effectively and efficiently requires serious time and energy commitment from all concerned and is learned-from and improved-upon on an iterative basis from year to year. The administrators of the scheme had to be managed, and the overall accountability of the budget rested with the principal but there were no matching equivalent senior management resources given.

It remains to be seen whether the administration time provided-for in the arrangements is sufficient for the expanded scheme and how schools with teacher-generated digital content will navigate their provision, and therefore JMB will continue to maintain close contact with the Department on this development.

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 in all DEIS schools
- › 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 in late 2025 with the views of school management comprehended in any revisions to the model



7. Providing for Guidance and Psychotherapy

Soundings

'Depression symptoms at the beginning of secondary school are related to higher dropout mainly by being associated with pessimistic views about the likelihood to reach desired school outcomes; student negative self-beliefs are in turn related to lower self-reported academic performance and predict a higher risk of dropping out'

Quiroga et al. (2013)

'All secondary schools should have access to somebody on site for those kids. There are traumas, really scary traumas, for some children

ESRI Report (2024)²⁸

'Anxiety is huge. Self-harm is huge. There's school refusal. Anxiety, you could kind of break it down into social anxiety and then just kind of educational-based anxiety, like not being able to do something. There is massive anger. ... I definitely would see conflict. I would deal with conflict, not from a discipline perspective but from a kind of a mediation or a restorative-practice perspective. It's endless. I would say I know a certain percentage of it and that there's way more that I'm not even aware of'. (Guidance Counsellor, Non-DEIS School)

ESRI Report (2024)²⁹

The Urgent Need for Psychotherapy Services

One of the key challenges facing our school communities centres on the impact of trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their consequences for socialisation, learning, and behaviour, particularly in the teenage years.

At school level, clear evidence of trauma and adversity impacting on mental health of our children and young people continue to be exacerbated in the long comet-tail of the pandemic, worsened by the additional emotional and financial strain of housing, energy, and food inflation on so many families. Serious concern is emerging across school leaders around worsening attendance rates, particularly in schools serving socially and economically disadvantaged communities and also on the growing evidence of demotivation brought about by both learning loss and de-socialisation factors in young people. In a recent School Attendance Data and Report³⁰ published in 2023, Tusla noted:

'The pandemic severely impacted school attendance in 2021–22 with fully opened schools. A similar pattern [to primary] can be seen in post-primary education, with student days lost rising from 2.3 million

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

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

30 https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/AAR_SAR_2019_22.pdf

days in 2019–20 (8.2%), 2.3 million days in 2020–21 (9.2%), to 5.4 million days in 2021–22, which was 12.6% of all days for 2021–22.

It is against this backdrop that the JMB has been calling for the provision of fully qualified psychotherapeutic services to schools. In this, 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'

Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) take many different forms:

- | | |
|--|------------------------------|
| › Domestic violence | › Incarcerated family member |
| › Substance abuse in family | › Consistent Poverty |
| › Emotional and/or physical neglect | › Experience of suicide |
| › Mental illness in family | › Childhood homelessness |
| › Loss of parent through divorce, death or abandonment | › Bullying in School |
| › Physical abuse | › Placed in State Care |
| › Emotional abuse | |

Meanwhile, Ireland is playing catch-up in this area with many European countries and the wider international community and current provision for such needs here is wholly inadequate.

Specifically:

- › 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 Adverse Childhood Experiences
- › 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 is 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

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 2023, there was a significant concession by the Department of Education to broaden the eligibility criteria initially set by NEPS for counsellors in schools, to now include members of the Irish Council for Psychotherapy and the Irish Association of Play Therapy & Psychotherapy and members of the Association of Child Art Psychotherapists. The ICP alone has over 1000 psychotherapists and so, initially at least, the supply of qualified and accredited professionals is not a limiting factor.

The National Lifelong Guidance Framework 2024-2030 is welcome as it offers a clear focus on the guidance role. **In doing so, however, it does not engage at all with 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 that 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 school as they are for clearly different strategic goals and objectives from that of Guidance work.

We congratulate the Department on the establishment of a Counselling Pilot in primary schools and the extension, in 2024, of the national pilot Strand 1 for Specialist Emotional Counsellors/Therapists to Dublin DEIS Primary Schools across areas of Finglas, Ballymun, Darndale, Tallaght, and Clondalkin.

But what about secondary schools?

JMB is urging the Minister to translate the 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 DEIS, and also over time all schools nationally for students experiencing trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

The other Programme for Government commitment to *‘Pilot Wellness Initiatives in high-need areas to develop new models of best practice’* need to go beyond generic supports to implement the successive Oireachtas Education Committee Reports recommendations for specialist emotional counsellors/therapists for one-to-one supports.

RECOMMENDATION:

- › 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

Improving our Guidance & Counselling Services

Soundings

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

Programme for Government

'The role of the guidance counsellor is complex and broad. It can vary from school to school in line with the needs of each school community. Guidance counselling has as its objective, the empowerment of students in terms of their educational, career, personal and social development. Guidance counsellors together with all members of school personnel, support students to make well-informed decisions, to overcome challenges and solve problems in all areas relating to guidance'

Draft guidelines on the implementation of whole-school guidance in post-primary schools (January 2025)

'Why is that in the North they can pay a psychologist to go in and support the Guidance Counsellor, but we can't?'

ESRI Report (2024)³¹

The current *Draft guidelines on the implementation of whole-school guidance in post-primary schools* set out an ambitious framework for the delivery of guidance on a school-wide basis:

'Whole-school guidance (WSG) refers to a process by which a whole-school community are involved in the provision of guidance ... Each school has a WSG team that designs and develops the WSG plan and subsequently orchestrates and implements all aspects of the plan. WSG in schools is extensive and encompasses many elements of school life. The number of team members, and those participating, will vary from school to school. Typically, membership of the WSG team will include a member of senior management, school guidance counsellors and others'

While the clarity of expectation is welcome, any fair reading of the guidelines will immediately surface questions around capacity issues, including:

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

As schools are still below the pre financial crisis allocation, JMB continues to seek a meaningful increase in provision for guidance and counselling in the face of a generation of students with unprecedented needs in terms of learning and metacognitive skills loss, complex career-plan support needs, as well as the ongoing challenges of traumatised, frequently relocated, refugee children and

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

an emerging 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.

The guidance and counselling needs of contemporary young people include damage to mental health, not alone due to the enduring effects of the pandemic such as learning loss and demotivation, but also the impact of social media technologies on young people in particular, the relentless pace of change, the demise of community supports, the gulf between rich and poor, ‘poly-crises’ of climate change and war, etc. Ongoing reports of dramatic increases in cases of online bullying – the vast majority of which occur outside school settings – demand urgent action. 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 seeking to site both the problem and the solution at the door of our schools 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 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. Meanwhile, we request a review of current guidance counsellor qualifications recognition policy, and 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › JMB seeks a meaningful increase in provision for guidance counselling, as well as psychotherapeutic counselling interventions, 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. School management requires the capacity to free-up relevant staff, and guidance counsellors in particular, for the necessary in-school group meetings involved in fact-finding, planning and in consultation, and particularly in relation to teachers investigating incidents of bullying
- › 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



8. Technologies: New Frontiers

Soundings

'In Irish post-primary schools, the integration of some aspects of digital technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), is an evolving landscape that has yet to be fully captured or reflected in inspection reports. However, this is expected to change significantly in the coming years as AI becomes more prevalent in everyday teaching, learning and assessment'

Department of Education Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review

'The Irish mean score on an index of the school's capacity to support teaching and learning using digital technologies, as reported by principals, was significantly lower than the mean for both the EU, and the OECD'

ESRI Report (2024)³²

'The capabilities of current AI systems are expanding rapidly, including the advent of plugins and connections with other tools and resources (search engines, mathematical engines, drawing packages, etc). This means that the range of assessment types that can be used to support (or subvert) is extensive'.

National Academic Integrity Network – QQI (2023)³³

Dependable Resourcing

As they look to the creation, secure storage, and transmission of new Leaving Certificate additional assessment components; increasing demands for assistive technologies; almost fully electronic administration; new pedagogies, and a raft of other ICT non-negotiables, principals and their school communities cannot help but reflect on the recent failure of the Department to issue the annual grant funding under the Digital Strategy for Schools. The core technology demands on schools require a stable and predictable resource-base on which to build and school leaders have now become highly risk-averse around their capacity to enter into even essential ICT spending commitments. In short, the non-payment of the ICT grant in 2022/23 school year, despite promises given that school year, has undermined trust and confidence in the predictability of government grants in general.

Investment must concentrate on ensuring schools' technologies are trustworthy and well-maintained. The Minister and Department must now future-proof multi-annual digital grants to schools and not leave students' life-chances to the lottery of their school's or their family's financial capacity or, indeed, the vagaries of budgetary pressures within and across government departments. Indeed, the absence of any commitments in the Programme for Government to enhance the technological capacity of schools, assistive technology aside, does not bode well for investment over the next five years.

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

33 <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2023-09/NAIN%20Generative%20AI%20Guidelines%20for%20Educators%202023.pdf>

The current Digital Strategy for Schools offers a coherent national framework aligning system level expectations with the ultimate school-level goal of enhancing the experience and outcomes for contemporary students growing up as ‘digital natives’. At present, our legacy of poor historical investment has left a capacity-deficit which must continue to be remediated. The largely unrestored cuts to school funding and staffing since the financial crisis, and in particular the ongoing discriminatory underfunding of voluntary secondary schools, means government must continue to centrally invest in infrastructural capacity-building. Such investment must not suffer from unanticipated trade-offs between capital spending and what should be seen as established, multi-annualised, resourcing.

Curriculum, Assessment, and Artificial Intelligence

A recent report commissioned by NCCA points to the bigger picture in terms of the impact of emerging technologies on the shared educational enterprise:

*‘There is a growing realisation that AI will impact on the kind of work people will engage with, and many traditional jobs that currently rely on working with text and data could be under threat, whilst jobs in the skilled trades sector may remain relatively untouched. Whilst it is impossible to predict what impact such technologies might have on the future of work, there is a growing need to provide students with opportunities to engage in more real-world learning experiences, and to record their participation and accomplishments in such activities within and beyond the school’.*³⁴

In August 2024, the Department committed to developing guidelines for teachers and educators on the use of Artificial Intelligence. While we await this resource, the rate at which such technologies are accelerating has reached a point where neither the post-primary curriculum nor its associated assessment models can be deemed to be untouched. The consequent anxiety on educators and the pressure on them to respond effectively to a force beyond anyone’s control demands an immediate and firm response from government:

‘The EU AI Act labels educational AI systems as high risk. From this month, schools must train teachers and leaders on how AI tools work and ensure compliance with the Act. This includes safeguarding student privacy and data security. While Oide has a good introductory online course on GenAI which 1,000 teachers have taken, it only begins to address the issues.

*Teachers need time to wrestle with GenAI, explore its possibilities and create guidelines as professionals and educational experts on how it should be used’*³⁵

To illustrate the policy-level lacuna in terms of guidance or support for schools, the State Examinations Commission met with school leaders at the Department’s 2025 Conference on Senior Cycle. While it awaits its own commissioned research, the advice from SEC for schools on mitigating the threats to integrity in the new Leaving Certificate additional assessment components lay in appealing to students’ ethical sensibilities. We need to do better. Teachers and principals are facing an era of intolerable pressure to verify the unverifiable and resist external invasion of what was once the sacred ground of equitable and honorable modes of assessment. Facing up to this challenge will require:

³⁴ The Potential of Technology to Support Online Certification and Reporting
Michael Hallissy, John Hurley & Harvey Mellor, H2 Learning

³⁵ <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2025/02/08/big-tech-is-bullying-schools-into-premature-adoption-of-ai-we-need-to-slow-down/>

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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. An auditing of senior cycle subject specifications to assess their vulnerability to GenAI in terms of summative assessment of their learning outcomes
 3. Redesigns of both specifications and components where vulnerabilities are discovered
 4. A review of additional assessment components to assess their manageability within the school day and under teacher support and supervision
 5. The establishment of a set of protocols to support school management in terms of assessment component verification
 6. A commitment to legally protect teachers and school leaders in terms of their good-faith approaches to pedagogic integrity and assessment verification
 7. A fit-for-purpose programme of professional learning for teachers and leaders on the potential and the challenges of GenAI, with adequate time release for its delivery
 8. Immediate negotiation with the education partners on the optimal approaches to be taken on these issues
 9. 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **JMB insists that the failure to release the 2023 ICT Grant to schools is not repeated in subsequent years and is future-proofed as a reliable annualised equipment purchasing, maintenance, and replacement**
- › **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, reliable annualised 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**
- › **DEIS school communities continue to require significant infrastructural investment in light of their particular challenges around inclusion**
- › **Adverse treatment of 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 high-stakes examination outcome integrity**

Supporting STEM Education

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.

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 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

The reasons underpinning this 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
- › A recognition of the impact of teachers' lack of payment while training and the scope for year-two PME's 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, 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 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.

Thus, it remains the position of the JMB that a more system-wide approach is taken to educational reform for 21st century Ireland and that the outdated, siloed models currently hampering the achievement

of potential are consigned to history by means of immediate, courageous and energised system-wide reform, high-level oversight, and greater coherence across all educational policy areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › Any eventual 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:
 - › Laboratory Assistants
 - › Dedicated time for teachers involved in STEM projects with their students
 - › Annualised equipment replacement and software upgrading grants
 - › Appropriate laboratory-class space and storage areas
 - › Dedicated time to coordinate STEM teaching and activities, including health and safety compliance



9. Buildings and Infrastructure

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.

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 JMB welcomes the new Climate Action Summer Works Scheme, and the JMB Advisory Service will be happy to assist schools with all aspects of the Scheme's implementation.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › A substantial increase in capital funding in order that the programme of major capital projects, Additional Accommodation projects, and projects under other schemes can progress through the design, tender and construction stages in a timely fashion
- › 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 these cases, the Additional Accommodation Scheme needs to be expanded in order to cater for schools where refurbishment of existing buildings is also necessary or where a new replacement building is the obvious solution
- › 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. In addition, an increase in personnel dealing with Emergency Works is required so that long delays with the sanction of some projects can be minimised
- › The Minor Works Grant for secondary schools which was introduced as a Covid measure, should be re-introduced and continued on an annual basis
- › The JMB has welcomed the publication in May 2024 of the *Maintenance Guidance Manual for Schools*. However, an implementation programme underpinned by resources, is required. The JMB will be happy to work with the Department on ways and means to implement the measures outlined in the Guidance Manual
- › The promised PE Hall building and modernisation programme as promised in '*Project Ireland*' must be commenced without delay so that all post-primary schools have access to facilities to support PE provision. The JMB note the commitment in the 2025 Programme for Government to prioritise the development of Physical Education halls. It is entirely inequitable that some schools who are lucky enough to be on the Major Capital Programme are provided with PE Halls while all other schools are currently refused funding
- › 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 Bases in schools be continued but that efforts be made to shorten the period from approval to construction in the case of a permanent building
- › The Department's Planning and Building Unit be adequately funded so that decisions on Stage Reports be made within a reasonable timeframe and that funding transfers and queries from schools be dealt with promptly

Concluding Comments

The Joint Managerial Body (JMB) extends sincere appreciation to our member schools, the councils of JMB and AMCSS, and the various sections and agencies across the Department of Education. Our collaborative efforts and open communication channels play a crucial role in nurturing positive working relationships which are aimed at advancing our shared objectives of enriching the nation's education system. Last year's ESRI Report *'Embracing Diversity in all its Forms': The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education (2024)* provided an independent and authoritative exposition of the economic and human value of this long-established sector to the nation's educational enterprise and of its unique expression in terms of characteristic spirit and values-in-action.

This submission presents the case for sufficient resourcing to enable schools to continue to bring value and values to the nation's education system. Throughout this submission, the JMB prioritises the need for additional deputy principal capacity in post-primary schools and adequate index-linked funding to meet the many challenges facing our school communities.

School leaders who have previously benefited from extra deputy principals consistently highlight the substantial value this additional resource brought to their schools. The JMB considers bolstering senior leadership in our schools essential to effectively implementing government policies, particularly those aimed at integrating students with diverse needs, including those with profound and enduring special educational needs. Enabling senior cycle redevelopment and rejuvenating junior cycle reform equally necessitate enhancing senior leadership, ensuring that curricular changes result in profound and meaningful shifts in learning and assessment practices. The JMB contends that management and administrative functions, while burdensome, cannot be mediated in isolation from the vision and values underpinning leadership.

The JMB is committed to representing and advocating for the interests of our member schools, and we are grateful for the trust they have placed in us. This submission is also driven by a commitment to a system-school dialogue to maintain a focus on effective targeting of the Budget's annual Education Vote, to enhance learning and teaching for our students, and to address the challenges faced by parents, students, and schools.

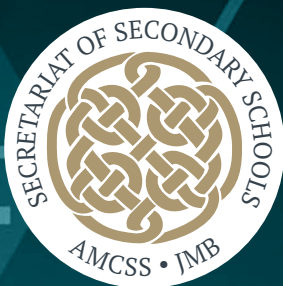
We believe that all per capita grant funding of education should be inflation-proofed by being consumer price index-linked on an annual basis and that funding of education should be of a sufficient proportion of the nation's GNI* to eliminate the need for voluntary contributions to make up a deficit unnecessarily created by the government in its unequal funding of schools by sector. The submission outlines what is necessary to address contemporary challenges under the following headings:

1. Investing in School Leadership
2. Special Educational Needs
3. The Education Enterprise: Curriculum Change and Teacher Supply
4. Fit-for-Purpose Staffing Allocations
5. Investment and Funding of Schools
6. Including All
7. Providing for Guidance and Psychotherapy
8. Technologies: New Frontiers
9. Buildings and Infrastructure

In closing, the JMB reaffirms our unwavering dedication to advocating for the best interests of our member schools and students. We want to stress our readiness to offer additional insights into any specific recommendations outlined in our submission. Our commitment to collaboration extends beyond this submission. We will persist in working closely with our member schools and the Department of Education and Youth to tackle emerging challenges, adjust to evolving educational environments, and to foster a nurturing and inclusive environment for all students.

**Mrs Deirdre Matthews,
JMB General Secretary**

April 2025



Summary of Recommendations

JMB Pre-Budget Submission 2026



Summary of Recommendations

JMB Pre-Budget Submission 2026

Matching Deep Policy Change with Deep Investment



1. Investing in School Leadership

In our Pre-Budget Submission 2025, the JMB set out an unarguable case for the enhancement of leadership capacity at deputy principal level in the face of overwhelming, concurrent, policy change in both curricular and special education demands.

In summary, our contention is that in light of evolving policy around inclusion and curriculum, the required systems-level knowledge, delegated authority, year-round availability, and agency within schools can best be mediated at deputy principal level, and not as an inadequate increase in the allocation of posts of responsibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › In light of evolving policy around inclusion, curriculum, child-protection, and anti-bullying, 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
- › Management and administrative functions, while often burdensome, cannot be mediated in isolation from the vision and values underpinning leadership
- › JMB strongly urges the Department to immediately provide for the allocation of additional deputy principal capacity across the majority of post primary schools as a matter of priority
- › 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



2. Special Educational Needs

In our sector, voluntary secondary schools are already 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. That said, the successful achievement of our national ambitions around inclusion cannot be realised until the capacity bottlenecks at school level are eliminated. The top four limiting factors are:

1. School Leadership and Management Capacity
2. Special Education Teacher Capacity
3. Special Educational Needs Coordination Capacity, and,
4. Infrastructural Capacity

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › JMB wishes to widen the conversation around SEN team coordination to a broader discussion around senior level leadership for learning, curriculum access for all, and the systems knowledge required to give effect to national policy
- › Our contention is that the aforementioned systems-level knowledge, authority, and agency at school level can best be mediated by a deputy principal rather than 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 an additional 10 per cent 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 a multi-annual commitment to major capital release from DPER and the Department of Finance in the 2026 Budget
- › JMB is calling for a significant expansion of access to funded professional learning opportunities, and in particular to post-graduate diploma programmes in special education
- › 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



3. The Education Enterprise: Curriculum Change and Teacher Supply

Senior Cycle

Curriculum development at national level is characterised by having a lag-phase wherein the development and consultation work continues ‘behind the scenes’ for some years but then emerges into schools for implementation in an apparently short timeframe. We are currently at this post lag-phase with senior cycle and experiencing newly developed curriculum specifications, assessment methodologies, state examination requirements, and teacher professional learning roll-out at a pace and depth never before seen in Irish education.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- High levels of anxiety are being reported by principals in terms of the capacity of their school structures to comprehend and comply with mandated change at senior cycle. This impacts particularly on the key limiting factor: Time, for:
 - scheduling of more flexible LCA and Community, Life and Work Studies programmes
 - reviewing and implementing new Transition Year programmes
 - implementing the revised SPHE specification and its associated policy development requirement
 - finding time for connections with the work of work and enterprise
 - finding time for additional assessment components
 - finding time for senior cycle free textbook provision
- Each of these areas represents a significant stressor on the school community and must be supported by realistic expectations and additional staffing capacity across our school sector
- In the context of accelerated and cumulative policy change, 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 to mitigate such an avoidable outcome

Junior Cycle

The centrality of the apex school leader and senior leadership team in terms of curricular change is well affirmed in the literature. The UL, in its research on junior cycle, found 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'* and this 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:

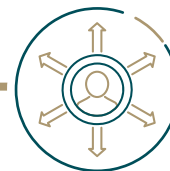
- › An acceptance of the, now proven, relationship between school culture and the embedding of curricular change demands that the principal and senior leadership team – the chief culture creators – are developed, and supported in their role
- › The 2024 ESRI report and the findings of the UL final report 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
- › The Department should expand the provision of high-quality professional learning and post-graduate development opportunities for teachers in SPHE and in RSE

Teacher Supply

While many countries are experiencing a shortage in teacher supply, the situation in Ireland is compounded by a crisis in the availability of accommodation and hence the disproportionate effect on schools in our larger cities and those serving disadvantaged communities. Every citizen has a role to play in valuing and affirming the nation's teachers. At school level, our principals and deputy principals are acutely aware of the wellbeing and job satisfaction factors that influence retention, and it is the role of the Department and its agencies to play their part in changing the narrative that the grass is greener elsewhere.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › The two-year PME programme must 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
- › 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



4. Fit for Purpose Staffing Allocations

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 was established during the financial emergency.

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 post 'Celtic Tiger' economic crash and to support a continuing recovery in terms of the learning loss experienced by this generation of students
- › 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.



5. Investment and Funding of Schools

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 all but gone.

Indeed, current and projected inflationary pressures are already impacting on school budgets and the JMB urges the immediate index-linking of all capitation grants to allow schools to pay their bills. Certainty on the timing of grants continues to be a very big problem. Financial planning involves managing cash flow and the lack of certainty on the timing of payments is causing stress for school leaders. The fact that Capitation has not been adjusted for inflation represents an avoidable structural problem and dependence on temporary funding to mitigate inflationary pressures undermines financial stability and increases the pressures on fund raising and parental payments.

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
- › 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 such schools



6. Including All

The JMB supports the government's direction of travel in providing a degree of tapering of supports for schools rather than a sharp withdrawal below the specified cut-off, and also seeks to have comprehended those larger schools with high absolute numbers of disadvantaged students, as opposed to proportion. This is not to deny the existence or impact of the 'multiplier effect'. What, in all justice, is required is a good-faith attempt to map resourcing against need, even though this will emerge as being more complex than heretofore. There is nothing as unequal as equal treatment. The social map of Ireland has been transformed by the pandemic. A 'new poor' has emerged and they don't necessarily have medical cards; they are struggling to keep their homes or pay high rents, but they prioritise education for their children and any new roll-out of provision must take cognisance of these realities.

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 in all DEIS schools
- › 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 in late 2025 with the views of school management comprehended in any revisions to the model



7. Providing for Guidance and Psychotherapy

One of the key challenges facing our school communities centres on the impact of trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their consequences for socialisation, learning, and behaviour, particularly in the teenage years. School-based emotional counsellors or psychotherapists providing one-to-one supports for students are a routine feature of many education systems internationally.

As schools are still below the pre financial crisis allocation, JMB continues to seek a meaningful increase in provision for guidance and counselling in the face of a generation of students with unprecedented needs in terms 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 emerging senior cycle demanding significant guidance counselling in terms of expanded course choices and progression routes.

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, as well as psychotherapeutic counselling interventions, 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. School management requires the capacity to free-up relevant staff, and guidance counsellors in particular, for the necessary in-school group meetings involved in fact-finding, planning and in consultation, and particularly in relation to teachers investigating incidents of bullying
- › 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



8. Technologies: New Frontiers

Reliable Funding of In-School Technologies

As they look to the creation, secure storage, and transmission of new Leaving Certificate additional assessment components; increasing demands for assistive technologies; almost fully electronic administration; new pedagogies, and a raft of other ICT non-negotiables, principals and their school communities cannot help but reflect on the failure in 2022/23 of the Department to issue the annual grant funding under the Digital Strategy for Schools. The core technology demands on schools require a stable and predictable resource-base on which to build and school leaders have now become highly risk-averse around their capacity to enter into even essential ICT spending commitments. In short, the non-payment of the ICT grant in 2022/23 school year, despite promises given that school year, has undermined trust and confidence in the predictability of government grants in general.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › JMB insists that the failure to release the 2023 ICT Grant to schools is not repeated in subsequent years and is future-proofed as a reliable annualised equipment purchasing, maintenance, and replacement
- › 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, reliable annualised 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
- › DEIS school communities continue to require significant infrastructural investment in light of their particular challenges around inclusion
- › Adverse treatment of 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 high-stakes examination outcome integrity

Supporting STEM Education

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.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › Any eventual 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:
 - › Laboratory Assistants
 - › Dedicated time for teachers involved in STEM projects with their students
 - › Annualised equipment replacement and software upgrading grants
 - › Appropriate laboratory-class space and storage areas
 - › Dedicated time to coordinate STEM teaching and activities, including health and safety compliance



9. Buildings and Infrastructure

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. 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › A substantial increase in capital funding in order that the programme of major capital projects, Additional Accommodation projects, and projects under other schemes can progress through the design, tender and construction stages in a timely fashion
- › 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 these cases, the Additional Accommodation Scheme needs to be expanded in order to cater for schools where refurbishment of existing buildings is also necessary or where a new replacement building is the obvious solution
- › 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. In addition, an increase in personnel dealing with Emergency Works is required so that long delays with the sanction of some projects can be minimised
- › The Minor Works Grant for secondary schools which was introduced as a Covid measure, should be re-introduced and continued on an annual basis
- › The JMB has welcomed the publication in May 2024 of the *Maintenance Guidance Manual for Schools*. However, an implementation programme underpinned by resources, is required. The JMB will be happy to work with the Department on ways and means to implement the measures outlined in the Guidance Manual
- › The promised PE Hall building and modernisation programme as promised in 'Project Ireland' must be commenced without delay so that all post-primary schools have access to facilities to support PE provision. The JMB note the commitment in the 2025 Programme for Government to prioritise the development of Physical Education halls. It is entirely inequitable that some schools who are lucky enough to be on the Major Capital Programme are provided with PE Halls while all other schools are currently refused funding
- › 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 Bases in schools be continued but that efforts be made to shorten the period from approval to construction in the case of a permanent building
- › The Department's Planning and Building Unit be adequately funded so that decisions on Stage Reports be made within a reasonable timeframe and that funding transfers and queries from schools be dealt with promptly

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