

JMB Pre-Budget Submission 2025



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Contributing to the Nation: Value and Values



Leadership Challenges



Investment in Schools



Resources and Funding



COVID-19 Experiences & Impact



Junior Cycle Framework



Senior Cycle Redevelopment



Additional/Special Educational Needs



Inclusive Education Supports



Technology At School



Infrastructural Constraints

Introduction

The recently published ESRI Report *‘Embracing Diversity in all its Forms’: The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education (2024)* provides 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.

Values are perhaps best described as ‘internal moral and ethical referencing’. Our voluntary secondary school communities have been self-evaluating against these reference points for many generations, and long before School Self-Evaluation became the rubric of policy. Indeed, our schools have also long maintained an explicit and active focus on Wellbeing before it became mandated, Inclusion, before it became an international commitment, celebrating Diversity as a principle of the Gospel values underpinning the ethos of the vast majority of our schools, and mitigating Disadvantage in all its forms, long before DEIS or other strategies became mainstreamed.

No sector of education has a monopoly of moral purpose, and the degree to which, for example, our three post primary sectors and their respective management bodies work together across the complete spectrum of educational development points to a shared civic impetus driving our engagement at policy and political levels. Such synergies at school leadership and management levels are, of course, mirrored across the nation’s teaching workforce and JMB maintains the highest levels of engagement across all aspects of education to the ultimate benefit of the state and its citizens. Any neutral reading of this unbiased and thorough ESRI research report will inevitably conclude that our voluntary secondary sector represents a profound source of good in our society, not alone reflecting its core values, but equally, driving them. We seek to educate for care of the Earth, for service, justice, and peace, and, as is evident from the report, ground such values in the life and teachings of Christ the Teacher.

In terms of value, it is undeniable, and evidenced in the report, that the sector is underfunded, relies too heavily on family contributions, and places demands on its principals far in excess of those experienced elsewhere. It is into this space that our Pre-Budget Submission 2025 sets out our organisation’s advocacy and stance. What makes this submission different is that we now have evidence of increasing resource requirements to meet policy demands, and also of the price our students, families, and educators must pay for a funding deficit which has been allowed to continue for far too long.

Our Pre-Budget Submission 2025 draws on the following headline findings of the report and sets out the perspective of the Joint Managerial Body as reflecting the key issues at stake in our shared national enterprise:

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| 1. Leadership Challenges | 6. Senior Cycle Redevelopment |
| 2. Investment in Schools | 7. Additional/Special Educational Needs |
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1. Leadership Challenges

From the ESRI Report:

'... 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'

'The diversity of roles, infrastructural, administrative, financial, human resources, industrial relations and so on, means that school leaders feel they have no time to dedicate to teaching and learning, 'the things of value''

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. Indeed, a joint submission this year from the three post primary management bodies, JMB, ETBI, and ACCS, established a definitive case for school leadership capacity enhancement and we strongly reiterate our JMB position here.

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.

Our case is set out under two headings:

1. The changed legislative, regulatory, and policy context, and,
2. Enhancing deputy principal allocation as *the* key enabling measure

1. The Changed Legislative, Regulatory, and Policy Context

(a) Special Educational Needs

In the past two decades, there has been a significant shift in the legislative, regulatory, and policy landscape of special education provision, making the argument for a substantial reframing of both school capacity, leadership, and practice underpinning such provision in light of these developments.

In addition to Article 42 of the Constitution, some key foundational provisions include:

- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989
- The Special Education Review Committee – Established 1991 – reported 1993

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- › The Education Act 1998
 - › The Equal Status Act 2000
 - › Education Welfare Act 2000
 - › Disability Act 2005
 - › The Irish Sign Language Act 2017
 - › The Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018
 - › The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) – ratified March 2018
 - › The Education (Provision in respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act 2022

Such policy aspirations, national, and international commitments, will require to be underpinned by significant changes in specialist educator allocation and school leadership capacity. Central to this dynamic lie two key policy shifts – the previously referred-to policy to have the needs of all young people met in inclusive settings, and the move, in resourcing terms, from the individual to the collective, by way of school profiling. As this latter policy becomes even more embedded when extended to SNA allocation, the subtle (or not so subtle) shift of needs identification, resource deployment, tracking, and accountability falls to the school – not the parent, the Department, the psychologist, or the clinician. It is in this space, more than perhaps the quantum of SET, SNA, or other investments, that the responsibility for emerging rights-based provision will lie, and it will fall to school communities more than any other entity under current trends. School communities will therefore need to be resourced by significant changes in specialist educator allocation and school leadership capacity, as further outlined in this section.

Furthermore, in light of contemporary and pending expectations around both junior and, particularly, senior cycle curricular frameworks, the argument for enhanced leadership capacity at deputy principal level becomes even stronger.

(b) A Curriculum for All

Junior Cycle

The pandemic-related school closures, the migration of teaching and learning online, the fracturing of the teacher-student relationship, the deferral of assessments, and the stripping away of social learning, all conspired to erode the momentum of junior cycle renewal. There is now an urgent need to revitalise the reforms at both school and system levels.

Both Interim report No. 3 of the University of Limerick's 4-year longitudinal study *'Exploring the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle'* and the current ESRI report identify findings which will require significant leadership-for-learning capacity to mediate at school level, including:

- › Teachers report that a significant mismatch has emerged between the curricular aims and the summative assessment demands within the Framework for Junior Cycle
- › The architecture of content, pedagogy, and assessment requires review and realignment
- › Teachers' capacity to find time to engage fully with the changes, to plan, and to develop resources remains a core concern
- › Teachers in some schools feel that a lack of resources and supportive digital technology within the school impacts on their capacity to enact the changes

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- › Students across schools report experiencing significant stress with regard to their everyday workloads and struggled to balance homework, CBAs, and study for tests and exams
 - › Fewer than one-third of students agreed that they enjoyed the classroom-based assessments (CBAs)
 - › Concerns have arisen in relation to the low number of students attaining a distinction and the demotivating effect this can have on students and teachers
 - › There exists widespread concern over the levels of preparedness for senior cycle

Senior Cycle

As the impact of the Minister's announcement of March 2022 now begins to reach schools in operational terms, the scope and scale of the developments point toward a root and branch reframing of teaching, learning, and assessment from Transition Year through to the completion of the Leaving Certificate examination.

Key developments requiring the highest levels of leadership and management now include:

(a) New LC Subjects

Two new Leaving Certificate subjects – Drama, Film and Theatre Studies; and Climate Action and Sustainable Development – are now fully developed and will be implemented in schools in 2025

(b) Engaging Schools

The curriculum and assessment arrangements that will form part of the redeveloped Framework for Senior Cycle will be co-constructed with students and their teachers. The NCCA has invited and now established a network of schools, representative of different types and sizes, to act as sites of early engagement around curricular developments. These schools will require support through a variety of forms to enable their participation and to ensure their roles are successfully mediated.

(c) Revised Subject Curricula

The complete redevelopment of all LC subjects will have a significant impact on schools and will demand exceptional leadership for learning at the highest levels.

(d) Changes to LC Assessment

As Leaving Certificate subjects are revised, they will each carry newly developed assessment components additional to the conventional written examination worth, in general, 40% of the total marks, with the written examination worth 60% of the final score. The scope for AAC overload, calendar bottlenecks, and submission deadlines in 6th year is obvious, as are the planning, storage, scheduling, communication, decision-making, and verification process demands at school level.

The need for professionalised, informed, and astute leadership of this development in particular is obvious, and the groundwork will require to be established in schools as of now.

(e) Programme Flexibility

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students now have flexibility of access to LCE Mathematics and Modern Foreign Languages, broadening the options for LCA. In addition, students in schools providing the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) can access the Link Modules without the requirement to meet vocational subject grouping or language criteria set out in Circular Letter 0040/2013. In addition, a revised and LCVP Programme Statement has been developed and will need to be comprehended by schools.

(f) Level 1 and 2 Learning Programmes

The lack of an equivalent senior cycle progression route or coherent programme for students currently undertaking L1LP and L2LPs at junior cycle has long been a significant gap in our post primary provision. NCCA has now developed a series of modules for students in senior cycle who follow these programmes and this welcome, though significant, expansion of L1 and L2LPs into senior cycle will demand deft and strategic leadership in every school providing such programmes.

(g) Transition Year

The Minister announced that ‘a revised Transition Year programme will be established, and greater access to Transition Year for all students will be encouraged’. While welcome, such broadening of access, alignment with the new TY Programme Statement from NCCA, and consequent redevelopment at school level, present a series of challenges in terms of school-level implementation. Key issues requiring exploration and decision at school level include:

1. Social equity

- Should TY always be optional?
- What social equity provisions should be made to ‘include all’?
- How can students from disadvantaged areas, and in schools within the DEIS programme specifically, be attracted to a well-designed and delivered TY programme?

2. Provision for students with additional needs

- What policy and programme provisions should be made for students with SEN in terms of accessing TY?
- How can students with EBD and other behavioural challenges be included and offered this opportunity to mature personally, and to develop as learners?

3. Resourcing issues

- What additional resources, staffing, programme development, and coordination time will be required to re-design a school’s TY programme, engage in TY for the first time, or deliver to all students at the end of junior cycle?
- What teacher CPD will be required to support such developments?

In light of the changed legislative, regulatory, and policy context set out above, the case for the enhancement of senior school leadership capacity is beyond argument. The question of whether such enhancement should take the form of additional allocation of posts at deputy principal or teacher post of responsibility levels must now be addressed.

2. Enhancing deputy principal allocation as *the* key enabling measure

At the Department’s Senior Cycle Redevelopment Conference on 27th February 2024, the Assistant Secretary General with responsibility for curriculum and assessment stated:

‘School leaders are pivotal in the next phases of the 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’.

JMB wholeheartedly concurs with this summation of need. Parents, teachers, subject departments, and students each need levels of support which must be met as set out in the following table:

Table 1: Curricular and Special Education Need				
	Parents	Individual Teachers	Subject Departments	Students
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	Capacity to actively listen, comprehend their needs, and come to implementable solutions	Senior leadership-level influence to support capacity-building and to enable decisions such as scheduling	Attending meetings; authorising resourcing and deployment decisions; evolving the timetable to meet needs	Capacity to support subject provision, class change, problem resolution, progress monitoring and parent meetings
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	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

Thus, the evolution of effective and relevant curricular change at school level requires a model of leadership with capacity, authority, and professional understanding of how such change is mediated. Such leadership cannot be relegated solely to the level of management resource hours or 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 Management Positions

	Deputy Principal	Post of Responsibility	Management Resource Hours
Seniority	Highest level – part of the senior leadership team	Middle management	No aligned seniority
Decision-making power (e.g., resourcing)	Capacity to make spending and other resourcing decisions	No authority to make resourcing decisions	No authority to make resourcing decisions
Staffing authority (e.g., deployment, freeing-up, team creation)	Has delegated authority from BOM and principal to deploy staff	No authority to make staffing decisions	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	Delegated tasks and reporting duties
Daily, weekly time availability	Optimal availability	No time for duties	Temporary substitution hours, inflexible deployment
Annual time availability (i.e., June and August)	Available	Not available	Not available
Management body support access	Has access to advice, updates, support, and professional development	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 development – has time and capacity to specialise	Training optional and with a specific functional focus	No training

We fully appreciate the position of teacher representatives in their argument for a restoration of posts of responsibility allocations to pre-financial crash levels, wherein approximately 50% of the teacher workforce were Assistant Principals. We are, of course, happy to see an improvement in such allocation, particularly in respect of smaller schools who lost out on the recent limited restoration processes. In terms of cost effectiveness however, leading and managing change around senior cycle and special education 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 beyond the scope of the teacher post of responsibility, irrespective of how many such posts are restored to the system.

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 support this evolving work and to meet the needs of the subject departments, inclusion teams, and individuals required to implement such significant change.

The following table sets out our position in terms of the minimum deputy principal additionality required to meet the senior leadership demands of our schools:

Table 3: Current and Proposed Additional Deputy Principal Allocations												
Pupil Enrolment Categories (Including PLC)	Deputy Principal Allocation per enrolment Category (WTEs)		Total No of Schools		Current Total Approved Deputy Principal Posts in Post Primary (WTEs)		Increase Requested in Deputy Principal Allocation per Enrolment Category (WTEs)		Total Deputy Principal Allocation per Enrolment Category Requested Increase (WTEs)		Total DPs Post-Primary Including Increase	
	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS	Non DEIS	DEIS
1-150	0.25	0.25	14	12	3.5	3	0.25	0.5	0.5	0.75	7	9
151-300	0.50	0.50	49	59	24.5	29.5	0.25	0.5	0.75	1	36.75	59
301-400	0.75	0.75	50	37	37.5	27.75	0.25	0.5	1	1.25	50	46.25
401-599	1	1	106	59	106	59	1	1	2	2	212	118
600-699	1	2	66	25	66	50	1	0	2	2	132	50
700-899	2	2	113	26	226	52	0	1	2	3	226	78
900-1199	3	3	80	12	240	36	0	0	3	3	240	36
1200+	3	3	12	2	36	6	1	1	4	4	48	8
Totals			490	232	739.5	263.25					944.75	336.25
		Total schools	722							Total Increase	205.25	73

* Pupil Enrolment Categories as published by the Department in the approved teaching posts on the staffing schedule in September 2023

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Management and administrative functions, while often burdensome, cannot be mediated in isolation from the vision and values underpinning leadership
- 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 by enhancing capacity at deputy principal level
- 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
- JMB is seeking an independent review of the principal's workload and responsibilities, their wellbeing and psychological health, professional preparation and development, support structures, step-down and exit-routes, and making recommendations for the remediation of an emerging principal recruitment and retention crisis



2. Investment in Schools

From the ESRI Report:

'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'

'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'

'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'

The ESRI report cites Ireland's expenditure on secondary education [as a proportion of Modified Gross National Income (GNI*)] as having moved close to the EU average of 1.8%. That said, a system-school dialogue will always be required to maintain a focus around effective targeting of the Budget's annual Education Vote, and to build in to this dialogue much greater degrees of responsiveness and agility.

The funding of voluntary secondary schools relies significantly on direct contributions from parents, highlighting the importance of establishing a sustainable funding model for the future. According to a patron body recent analysis of year-end (YE) accounts 2023 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.

Climate change does not only apply to nature, it is equally a sociological phenomenon as societal shifts in areas such as access to housing, international mobility, the reframing of personal priorities post-pandemic, later retirement, seismic and rapid technological change, and changing cultural narratives all conspire to change the climate around socially sensitive professions such as teaching.

Protecting Teacher Supply and Retention

Whereas we cannot control the tides of successive waves of change, we must at times create a counter-cultural narrative around our core beliefs which we see as threatened. In engaging with the Department and its agencies around the teacher supply issue, the JMB sees significant evidence that this very real crisis, particularly in the greater Dublin region, is being taken very seriously by the Minister, her Secretary General, and their officials. We will look at some of their interventions later in this section, but everyone in the education enterprise has work to do, and in particular, around climate control. What do we say, and how is it heard, when we educators speak to civic society about teaching as a profession? What do we reveal of ourselves at our annual conferences? What do we write in the newspapers? What is our bearing and demeanour in our day-to-day work with young people? What pride do we display in our work

and achievements? What do we do to bring in potential educators from society's margins? All of these questions leave us with a responsibility to generate a narrative around teaching and leading that create something of a magnetic draw to the profession and to inspire young and not-so-young to consider teaching as a career. The challenge is equally to maintain and raise the profession's standing within the wider community and to have 'the village' want to raise its own teachers.

In terms of more immediate actions, JMB strongly supports the Department, the Teaching Council, and other relevant agencies in addressing teacher supply challenges from as many approaches as possible.

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

We see further development of the Teacher Sharing Scheme as a longer-term enabling measure to both augment the curricular needs of schools while enabling teachers to access full-time contact hours. The scheme's linkage with the measure allowing for teachers to have extended class contact time beyond 21:20 hours represents a creative step towards what has been a slow starter in terms of initiatives.

Over two thousand student teachers are registered under Route 5. JMB has been strongly advocating for adjustments to ITE programmes to maximise the availability of PME Year 2 students in particular to undertake substitution and stand-alone class work. We accept that there will be no return to a one-year post graduate programme of initial teacher education. That said, a review of programme structure across providers is long overdue and we believe there is scope for mirroring of certain medical professional courses such as nursing, wherein final year students experience the full scope and scale of their new role under a supported, paid placement framework.

Within the existing teaching workforce, a much-accelerated expansion of upskilling programmes is required, along with an expansion in the number of places in current programmes. There is increasing clarity emerging around not alone unfilled gaps in current subject areas but also a government-wide emphasis on specific policy areas such as STEM education, the Arts, in Gaeilge, and in special educational needs. Funded post-graduate upskilling modules and programmes in these areas must become more of a priority.

Diversifying the teaching profession from its long-standing demographic homogeneity represents both a moral and pragmatic enterprise. JMB is developing resources to raise awareness of the potential of broader recruitment approaches as well as interrogating areas of unconscious bias across employers. We would like to see more timely registration of teachers from the North of Ireland and from further afield and acknowledge that the Teaching Council has made significant progress in this area. Schools are nonetheless reporting delays in international police vetting and this is an area that would benefit from further investigation. It would also make sense for Ireland to establish teaching as a priority profession in terms of visa entry to the state and permission to work. In this respect, we have much to learn from Australia which currently does so and is attracting many of our own teaching graduates as a result.

JMB appreciates the strands of activity currently underway, and which also include earlier issuing of teacher allocations supporting more timely recruitment by school management; teacher induction in Ireland being made available to teachers qualified outside the state, and, the continuation of existing abatement measures, including ongoing engagement with DFHERIS.

We are aware, however, that we do not have a monopoly of wisdom on addressing issues around teacher recruitment and retention and recommend that the Department establishes listening structures with current post-primary principals to hear first-hand what local strategies they are generating and to see whether these can be trialled and mainstreamed more widely.

Restoring the Pupil-Teacher Ratio

In the longer 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 pupil-teacher ratio to be allocated-for and staffed.

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.

Successive Ministers appear to have forgotten the impact on schools and students of our seriously eroded staffing schedules. 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%.

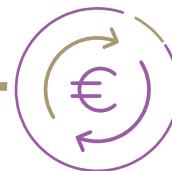
It should not be forgotten that the increase of the PTR to 19:1 coupled with the reduction in guidance counselling, EAL, and Traveller support hours from schools (an effective PTR increase), have had a very severe impact on the educational experience being offered in schools. The perception that increasing 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.

The current Programme for Government indicates that the State will ‘seek to make further progress in reducing pupil teacher ratios in primary schools’. 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 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.

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.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › The two-year PME programme must be 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
- › 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 in recent years and to support a continuing recovery in terms of the learning loss experienced by this generation of students
- › 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



3. Resources and Funding

From the ESRI Report:

'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'

'We are exceptionally reliant on the voluntary contribution - we wouldn't be able to continue without it'

'The evidence from GUI shows the real impact of the funding challenges, with schools in the voluntary sector faring less well in terms of sports and computing facilities for example'

Future historians will look back on the anachronistic practice of schools having to seek voluntary contributions from parents to offset the deficit in their state funding as a bewildering phenomenon. One report after another, one agency after another, cites the practice as pressuring and degrading both for families and for the schools who must approach them for such support.

Adding to the findings of previous ESRI research¹, that of Grant Thornton², submissions from Barnardos and St Vincent DePaul, we now have ample evidence from the ESRI report on our sector of the impact of an institutionalised, embedded funding deficit and the consequent struggle to keep the school operating by resorting to parental contributions:

- › There's a message going out from the Minister saying no school should be charging voluntary contributions. So parents are saying, 'well, I don't have to pay that', so the school is left out of pocket and what ends up happening is you've got some parents covering all parents
- › The parental [voluntary] contribution to balance the budget is huge. It's for licences for computers, lockers (repairs, key replacement), there's a list of things
- › The amount of money that comes to pay a school secretary and a caretaker is ... you couldn't get somebody to work for it. You know, €9,000 a year, €12,000 a year
- › 'It's unequal, it's unfair...it's definitely an impediment to the development of our school. I'm introducing a school lotto to try to fund school development...

The Irish economy would not alone be readily capable of absorbing the cost of equitable funding of its schools, the return to the exchequer in terms of reduced family pressures and poverty, a more positive student relationship with their school, and with more school time devoted to its core enterprise of teaching for learning and not to fundraising, would be measurably significant.

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

2 <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>

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.

Meanwhile, significant inflationary pressures have been impacting on school budgets for the past three years and the JMB urges, as an immediate measure, the index-linking of all capitation grants to allow schools to enable schools to meet their financial obligations and to engage in effective resource management.

As previously stated, the reliance of voluntary secondary schools on direct contributions from parents underscores the financial strain experienced by families in meeting educational costs, leaving approximately 55% of schools facing deficits in their YE 2023 accounts were it not for parental payments. This reliance highlights the importance of working to establish a sustainable funding model for the future.

The JMB would welcome an opportunity to engage with the Department of Education in developing a comprehensive approach to funding ensuring the stability and viability of voluntary secondary schools in the long term while also removing the undoubted pressure on parents.

There will, of course, be many competing priorities in each forthcoming government Budget. Equalisation of funding across all school communities and sectors must be one of them. The Primary and Post-Primary section of the current Programme for Government opens with the words *‘Education is a cornerstone of society and a driver of social equality’*. It is the JMB position that now is the time to move beyond the rhetoric of social equality to its actualisation and we welcome the Programme’s commitment to *‘increase the capitation grant with a view to reducing the reliance on voluntary contributions made to schools’*.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › A commencement must be made to address the inequitable funding of schools in the Voluntary Secondary sector by initiating the Equalisation process already conceded³ by government
- › All per-capita grant aid to schools must be inflation-proofed by being consumer price index-linked on an annual basis
- › Schools in the fee-charging sector are generally grant-aided at either 50% or 0% of the rest of the voluntary secondary sector and this policy should be reviewed in light of the financial pressures on many such schools
- › A government-level commitment must be made to eliminating, over a three-year period, the need for schools to seek voluntary contributions from families

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



4. COVID-19 Experiences & Impact

From the ESRI Report:

'Though the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted at the end of February 2022 in Ireland, COVID-19 continues to impact many aspects of students' lives today'

'For instance, nearly 80% of 13-year-olds were in schools where their principal reported (much) worse student wellbeing, and 71% were in schools where their principal reported (much) worse attendance compared to the pre-COVID-19 situation'

'Young adults' mental wellbeing was also adversely impacted by the pandemic, characterised by 'a general trend of less psychological well-being and more mental health problems, such as heightened stress, and depressive and anxiety symptoms during the pandemic''

Meeting the Demand for Student Emotional Therapeutic Supports

The further we get from the immediate experiences of the Covid pandemic, the greater the risk of denying its long-term impact on young people. 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. Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) take many different forms, including:

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

At school level, serious concern is emerging 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 its most recent School Attendance Data and Report⁴ 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 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.'

⁴ https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/AAR_SAR_2019_22.pdf

It is against this backdrop that the JMB has been calling for the provision of fully qualified psychotherapeutic services to schools. The optimal model is where a trained psychotherapist engages over an extended time with a school community, becomes embedded in the professional life of its educators, and develops co-professional relationship with teachers, meeting with parents, and providing appropriate therapeutic supports to relevant students.

As articulated by the Irish Council for Psychotherapy in its recent submission to the Minister:

'The Department has already signalled that additional funding will not be made available for the provision of similar services in the post-primary sector. In 2017, the National Suicide Research Foundation published⁵ a school-based study of mental health and suicide prevention and found that one in twenty-eight young people with an average age of 14 years had attempted suicide. Offering specialist therapeutic intervention in a timely manner in post primary schools – especially DEIS schools in large urban areas – will greatly improve mental health outcomes for our young people and save the state possible future high treatment costs.

ICP urges the Minister to reconsider this position and to put in place a trialling of psychotherapy services purchased by grant-aid into a set of post-primary schools, with a review of its effectiveness to be carried out following a year of implementation'.

The Department is standing by its position not to expand into post-primary the pilot scheme to deploy emotional counselling/therapeutic supports in primary schools to address trauma, anxiety, and mental health difficulties of vulnerable children. In light of this stance, JMB urges the Department to consider trialling of a resourced model of an 'embedded one-to-one psychotherapy service' across a limited number of secondary schools and to review its impact after a period of time. Such a limited piloting would establish the basis of need, the nature of the optimal response, and the parameters of such a service to schools and provide insights into both value-for-money and effectiveness for policymakers to consider into the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › The JMB urges the Minister to expand into post-primary the piloting of a scheme to deploy emotional counselling/therapeutic supports in primary schools to address trauma, anxiety, and mental health difficulties of vulnerable children and young people
- › In the absence of such an expansion, we are seeking a model of accessing of psychotherapeutic services in line with the proposals of the ICP (March 2024): 'ICP urges the Minister to put in place a trialling of psychotherapy services purchased by grant-aid into a set of post-primary schools, with a review of its effectiveness to be carried out following a year of implementation'.

5 2017. National Suicide Research Foundation, 'Young Lives in Ireland: A school-based study of mental health and suicide prevention'.

Improving our Guidance & Counselling Services

From the ESRI Report:

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

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

'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)

JMB very much appreciates the policy clarity emerging from the newly established Guidance Section of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit within the Department. High quality sets of guidelines on whole school guidance and aspects of the guidance counsellor's role are now available to schools and we equally appreciate the positive working relationship we now have with the CAP Guidance Unit.

It is nonetheless important to point out that there exist high levels of damage to mental health in our society's younger members 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.

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 refugee children and 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.

Meanwhile, one of the greatest challenges facing school management in making provision for students' mental health support is 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 support 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 therapeutic 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**
- **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**
- **In implementing their anti-bullying policies as set out in the Department's new Cineáltas framework, schools' most pressing needs centre on time and expertise. School management requires the capacity to free-up relevant staff 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**



5. Junior Cycle Framework

From the ESRI Report:

'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'

'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'

The significant concurrence between the findings of the ESRI report on voluntary secondary schools and the Third Interim Report outcomes from the University of Limerick's 4-year longitudinal study *'Exploring the Introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle'* points to a growing realisation of the realities of large-scale curricular change and the lessons we can learn for the future.

In terms of positive outcomes, both pieces of research affirm progress in five dimensions:

1. Teachers believed CBAs supported student engagement, enjoyment, motivation, and skills development, with greater levels of positivity being reported by UL than ESRI in their reports
2. Teachers valued Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings where they shared examples of work and engaged in professional discussions to support judgement. On balance, these SLAR meetings were seen to promote consistency and fairness in judgement
3. The majority of teachers perceived Learning Outcomes to be clearly communicated, achievable and a good representation of the knowledge, skills and values within each subject
4. The majority of teachers indicated that they were applying the Wellbeing indicators in teaching and noted that the Wellbeing guidelines were being used in a whole-school approach
5. School leadership was identified as a key dimension for enactment and school management were perceived to be supportive of the Framework, discussing it at staff meetings and supporting teacher use of professional time

The reports equally reveal serious levels of disquiet across school communities in another five dimensions:

1. The full realisation of the Framework for Junior Cycle is 'straight-jacketed' by existing modes of assessment not in line with the wider curriculum changes and a misalignment with at the existing Senior Cycle and related Leaving Certificate examinations
2. Teachers express concerns about the capacity of the Junior Cycle terminal assessment to allow students to demonstrate their learning and accurately measure it

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3. Concerns are being raised about the removal of foundation level papers, and the consequent impact accessibility of the curriculum and student confidence
 4. 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
 5. Most of the school principals saw their roles as advocates for the changes and they supported and encouraged staff in the process in numerous ways, however, navigating the challenges associated with directives from Teacher Unions impeded the work of some principals and inhibited the scope to fully embed new practices

While it is accepted that the Minister and Department will await more definitive and perhaps final outcomes and recommendations from the UL longitudinal study before enacting any significant change, the JMB does seek to set out its own position on future directions for policy as follows:

The centrality of the apex school leader and senior leadership team in terms of school culture creation 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.

Capacity-building, however, goes beyond workforce additionality – it equally requires attention to deep professional development in terms of leadership-for-learning. One finding from the UL study pointed out that 'it was evident from the school principal interviews that some valued the curriculum changes more than others', and such discontinuity across school leaders represents a serious system-level challenge as we proceed with an accelerated programme of redevelopment across the entire post primary curriculum. Providing CDP or TPL is not sufficient in itself – school leaders must be provided with the time and professional space within which to undertake such deep learning. Our conception of the role of the principal thus needs to be reframed in terms of their core responsibility as set out in the Education Act, Section 22:

'The Principal of a recognised school and the teachers in a recognised school, under the direction of the Principal, shall have responsibility, in accordance with this Act, for the instruction provided to students in the school and shall contribute, generally, to the education and personal development of students in that school'

The integration of technologies into teaching, learning, assessment, and reporting – not to mention administration, communication, and financial management – point to a need for yet another strand of resourcing in terms of capacity-building and investment in infrastructure. The architecture of curriculum delivery has fundamentally changed, and the school leader must be equally professionally developed and resourced to meet the demands of the irreversible digitisation of all aspects of school life.

Finally, principals are, in general, the primary interface between parents and the school. JMB views the connection between the system and the family in terms of the 2015 junior cycle framework developments as a significant failure. Parents and guardians do not universally engage with pdfs, websites, or webinars – they want, and need, to meet with their school principal. Their principal, in turn, must have the highest degree of confidence that the curricular changes they are charged with implementing can be

communicated appropriately and with a level of assurance that comes from a deep understanding of the complexities at play within such change. Such confidence can only be developed if the school leader has been professionally supported and freed-up to develop their comprehension of the theoretical and practical dynamics of curricular change-management.

Either we are serious about transforming our post primary curricular frameworks or we are not. Overwhelmed and under-supported principals cannot be expected to act as the primary change agents in this national project without having the capacity to do so and every single section of this Pre-Budget Submission sets out the minimum requirements for such transformation to succeed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **The ESRI report and the findings of the longitudinal study 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, even at this interim phase**
- **The evident incoherence between curricular intentions and the summative arrangements at junior cycle require immediate attention, and not awaiting the publication of the final report from the longitudinal study**
- **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 liberated, developed, and supported in their role**
- **Scheduling of SLAR meetings continues to be a contested issue at school level. Agreement on a framework for scheduling SLAR meetings that protects tuition time must be achieved as a matter of priority**
- **The Department should put in place high quality professional learning and post-graduate development opportunities for contemporary teachers in SPHE and in RSE, a requirement of junior cycle Wellbeing provision and now at senior cycle from 2024**
- **ITE programmes should comprehend SPHE education and professional diploma programmes should be scaled-up nationally**



6. Senior Cycle Redevelopment

From the ESRI Report:

'This study has provided yet further evidence on the need for senior cycle redevelopment to proceed in a timely manner'

'In particular, stakeholders highlighted the need for an integrated senior cycle programme, incorporating aspects of the LCA programme into one mainstream programme'

'Students are vocal on the difficulties experienced on transition to senior cycle education, and the findings suggest a need for greater transition support, both academic and social, as part of the senior cycle redevelopment'

The language of redevelopment, as opposed to reform, points to the delicate balance that must be achieved in bringing our post-compulsory phase of education into a more relevant and engaging space while still retaining public and professional confidence. This tension is reflected in the ESRI report and is most frequently articulated in terms of the mismatch between the pedagogy of our new junior cycle framework and the andragogy of the emerging equivalent at senior cycle. It must be noted however, that there has always been this mismatch. The Junior Certificate examination looked, and felt like, the Leaving Certificate but generations of students still encountered the 'shock' of an entirely new level of rigour necessary to navigate fifth and sixth year. It is perhaps into this space that the Minister's emphasis on a renewed Transition Year Programme carries such importance, as do the new flexibilities around LCA, LCVP, and L1/L2LPs.

The system-level experience of both 2023 and 2024 could be characterised as 'acceleration', explicitly sought by the Minister. This inflationary period of curriculum development, led by the NCCA, but equally involving the State Examinations Commission and a range of other actors, will only begin to impact on school level from the 2024/25 school year and will, inevitably, accelerate school's requirements for a range of capacity building and enhancement measures.

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

The associated teacher release for professional learning, textbook change, 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).

In light of the unsuccessful attempt to migrate some Leaving Certificate assessment-points into fifth year, what will inevitably emerge is a growing set of LC assessment events, each worth at least 40% of a student's overall grade, requiring to be scheduled, supervised, monitored, verified, stored, secured, signed-off on by the principal, generally submitted online by already-pressurised teachers and school leaders, and all to occur within strict deadlines all at the same point toward the end of sixth year.

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. The launch of the revised Statement must be accompanied by a significant investment from the Department. Cost barriers can only be mitigated by schools if they have the resources to do so, particularly in relation to textbooks, technologies, school trips, and other outreach co-curricular activities. In this regard, an enhanced TY capitation grant should be established on an enrolment pro-rata basis, with additionality provided to schools within the DEIS programme and those with significant enrolment of students with SEN.

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 LCVP, and programme flexibility within LCA in relation to Maths and MFL.

Level 2 Learning programmes were introduced in 2015 under the new Framework for Junior Cycle and were a hugely welcome and successful development on previous curricular provisions for students in its target grouping. That said, even on a simple numerical basis, it could have been anticipated that, by 2018, the first cohort of students following the programme would have been destined for senior cycle. A window of opportunity then existed to make provision for progression for students following L2LPs, yet now, in 2024, we have a six-year backup on students for whom the only routes available (if they stayed in school at all) was into Transition Year, and then into the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. LCA was not designed to cater for such students and, even where it is provided, such participation surfaced a myriad of challenges, for which students, their families, and schools were not prepared or supported.

Indications are that the current model of special class provision will be afforded policy-level support in terms of its flexibility of access into mainstream subject provision in the school. Though not without its challenges to teachers in terms of differentiation and coordination, there exists a largely unacknowledged benefit to the broader body of students when welcoming and including students from special class settings into their classrooms and social domains.

Notwithstanding its intrinsic value, 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.

Social, Personal, and Health Education is undergoing significant and welcome change across both junior and senior cycles and 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; absolute clarity on the direction of travel of senior cycle SPHE roll-out; 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.

These developments are in addition to already announced measures including:

The opening up of access to LCVP with consequent challenges around sourcing module teachers and added pressure on the in-school May Leaving Certificate examination component schedule, and,

Access to maths and MFL by LCA students with consequent challenges around co-timetabling, teacher availability, and blended assessment and reporting processes

Each of these developments make significant demands on the timetabling capacity of schools and, in particular, on the capacity of senior leadership to deliver on this crucial national enterprise. Meanwhile, 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 junior cycle cannot be allowed to be repeated in the current context and the Department 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:

- The Minister and Department must acknowledge that effective communication is key to success in terms of rapid and deep curricular change at senior cycle. This will require:
 - Timely updates from the Department and its agencies
 - Empowerment of principals and deputies in terms of school-wide advocacy for change
 - An authentic partnership approach to supporting parents' understanding of the changes already underway
 - Enhancement of guidance counselling provision to support individual and group decision-making in progression to senior cycle
- The call for timeliness in the ESRI report points to an experience of late announcement of significant change with little or no time for planning, scheduling, communication, and staff deployment across schools. Policymakers and those at the political level must comprehend the complex dynamics of school leadership and management and set more realistic expectations in terms of timeframes
- 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:
 - implementing the revised SPHE specification
 - scheduling of more flexible LCA and LCVP programmes
 - reviewing and implementing new Transition Year programmes
 - finding time for connections with the work of work and enterprise
 - finding time for additional assessment components
- 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



7. Additional/Special Educational Needs

From the ESRI Report:

'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'

'School principals, given the implications of the reforms for them, hold additional responsibility for interpreting and managing complex systems for allocation, accountability, and staff fidelity within whole school inclusion'

'Overall resources available are seen as falling short of what is required to adequately support students and meet all needs. To some extent this reflects differential allocations for the voluntary sector'

1. The Impact of Policy Change

Our Pre-Budget Submission 2024 raised the following concern:

'It is unclear whether the current review of EPSEN is aimed at an extreme model of mainstream inclusion whereby even children and young people currently receiving their care and education in special school settings will have the right to attend their local school. If that is the case, the government should be up front in its ambitions, and before enacting any new legislation, open the conversation with all providers and parents around the consequences of such an approach. Inclusion, for inclusion's sake, or worse, for political and fiscal expediency, represents a populist but highly dangerous agenda. We must not be afraid to problematise in advance of commencement every aspect of such a model and ensure that whatever is needed is provided'.

In light of the publication of the landmark NCSE paper *'An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society'* and its adoption as Department policy by both Ministers, the direction of travel is now absolutely clear – our school system will require to adapt itself to a radical conceptualisation of inclusion and the process of realising this goal begins now.

Underpinning this demand will be a fundamental revision of the EPSEN Act (2004) presumably giving legislative weight to Ireland's commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and aligning with the new policy framework as set out in the NCSE paper.

It must, however, be stated from the outset that our voluntary secondary schools are already extraordinarily inclusive, innovative, professionally committed, and welcoming communities and that we are building on strong ethical and, indeed, spiritual foundations when it comes to living out each school's expressed ethos. This review of the legislative and policy underpinnings of the State's provision for our most vulnerable, though equally most wonderfully diverse, resilient, and talented young people, offers our citizens an opportunity to reframe both our conversation and our language as we grow in social maturity as a nation.

Both levers, the NCSE paper and the EPSEN review, carry hugely significant implications for schools, and in particular, for school management. Each one of the sixteen recommendations set out in the policy paper (and presumably to be soon underpinned by legislation and circular) carries new and additional levels of responsibility for principals, deputy principals, and Boards of Management. In pointing out the challenges to this national inclusion agenda, the JMB seeks to support its goals, not undermine them. We want this new policy direction to succeed, but each of its actions must start from where we are, and that requires an honest evaluation under each heading.

The progressive realisation of an inclusive school system

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

Greater availability of therapeutic and psychological supports

Few can see an expansion nationally of the School Inclusion Model (SIM) being realised to provide 4,000 schools with access to a wrap-around in-school therapy service – even the current, limited pilot scheme is failing to fully staff itself with OTs, SLTs, behaviour therapists, nurses, and psychotherapists. The Department and NCSE should establish heavily incentivised under- and post-graduate programmes in the range of therapies it requires to fulfil this ambition, and to create a stream of graduates with training and experience of the therapies in education settings – a specialism in itself.

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

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

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

Even in advance of the proposed significant policy and practice shifts, schools are struggling to source appropriately qualified special education teachers, guidance counsellors, and teachers with the experience and capacity to lead and coordinate in-school SEN provision. In particular, the expansion of special class provision in mainstream secondary schools has brought with it an urgent need for professionalising our approaches to behaviours of concern.

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

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

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

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

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

The perception that students in special education provision in mainstream settings are stranded in ASD or MGLD classes with no review, adjustment, or access to other programmes or levels does not reflect the reality in our schools. It is accepted that dual enrolment has proved challenging but the greatest barrier to provision mapping for individual students has been the dearth of accessible professional therapeutic and psychological recommendations and supports. Schools are forced to take significant decisions without having their judgements augmented by other relevant sources of insight and advice and until this is addressed, schools will continue to carry serious anxieties around their capacity to stand over targets set out in IEPs or their proxies.

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

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

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

This particular requirement will, in our opinion, require to be driven by legislation and, in particular, by a successor to the EPSEN Act (2004). The uncommenced sections of the Act have left a lacuna in terms of provision mapping, target setting, and tracking, which have in turn led to a failure to resource individual education planning and consequent teacher union directives around non-cooperation with IEPs or their proxies. School management has therefore been caught in the middle, with responsibilities but no mandate, resourcing, or professional support. Whatever emerges from the EPSEN review must carry with it a significant superstructure of capacity and authority and not have yet another 'Irish solution' which fails to address the core issues at stake.

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

The Department can produce all the guidance it wishes but if the capacity to deliver is not in place, all the PDFs and webinars in the world will not have their guidelines implemented. What is essential is an enhancement of the leadership capacity at deputy principal level across the post primary system and our previous recommendation around sustainable leadership remain our strongest claim on Budget 2025.

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

Enhanced professionalisation measures are, of course, necessary if the teaching workforce is to be expected to carry this hugely significant inclusion responsibility on behalf of the state. That said, and aligning with our previous point, not one circular or guideline (including this year's revised versions) have made any ring-fenced resource provision for SENCO responsibilities. We continue to arbitrarily determine what we can ethically take from the SET allocation to students but if this is inadequate and unsatisfactory now, it will certainly be so when the new wave of policies and expectations, such as AON completions, land at school level. It is high time to make SEN Coordination a priority and to give it its rightful place in the lifeworld and systemsworld of the contemporary school. Our proposal for such capacity enhancement is set out in the next section.

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

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

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

2. Improving Provision for Special Education Coordination

The JMB, ETBI, and ACCS engage collaboratively with the Department and the NCSE under a long-standing structure called the Management Representative Group (MRG). The MRG has repeatedly asserted the need for dedicated special needs coordination, planning, tracking, consultation, and reporting in every school, and this position is fully supported by the NCSE.

The headline challenges include:

- › A rapidly increasing demand for special classes
- › A requirement to professionalise all staff around autism support
- › A rapidly changing SNA workforce in terms of scale and IR demands
- › Increasing demand for tracking, recording, evaluation, legal accountability and reporting as exemplified by the AON process
- › A changing policy and implementation landscape for such provision under the NCSE policy advice
- › Legislative and regulatory change emerging from the review of the EPSSEN Act
- › The necessity of a team-based approach to SEN and AEN provision

While no formal SENCO individual or team-based role is properly resourced, some key tasks are outlined in the Department's revised *Special Education Teaching Allocation Model: Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools (2024)*:

Special Education Coordination Responsibilities

- › Contributing to the development of an inclusive school culture, demonstrated through ethos, values and inclusive school policies and practices.
- › The promotion of inclusive, whole-school preventative and proactive teaching and learning approaches.
- › The ongoing development of inclusive school structures and systems in the organisation of provision for young people with special educational needs, including informing timetabling of additional supports.
- › Liaising closely with the principal on the development, implementation and monitoring of whole-school approaches to the education of young people with special educational needs.
- › Developing whole-school procedures for the selection of young people for additional teaching support, using the Continuum of Support and the problem-solving process.
- › Using the School Provision Plan to record relevant information relating to young people receiving additional support at the levels of Support for Some and Support for a Few, in order to track provision and progression across the Continuum of Support.

- › Coordinating information gathering, screening and testing.
- › Transition planning for young people with special educational needs.
- › Ensuring that all young people identified with special educational needs, who receive additional teaching support, have their needs documented in a Student Support File.
- › Ensuring that a Student Support Plan is developed and included in the Student Support File.
- › Distributing responsibility within the team for the development, implementation and review of Student Support Plans.
- › Supporting the communication of information regarding the young person's special educational needs to relevant staff.
- › Establishing procedures and protocols for liaising with other agencies, including the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), National Council for Special Education (NCSE), the Inspectorate and allied health professionals.
- › Collaborating and coordinating provision across school support structures, including Guidance Counsellors and representation on the Student Support team.

To begin to meet these challenges, schools require:

- (a) that deputy principal level leadership and support for the special education team and wider staff is enabled under the enhanced capacity provisions outlined earlier in this submission
- (b) that the SEN coordination provisions outlined in the current Circular **are maintained** and flexibly deployable across the special education team, and,
- (c) that additional SEN Coordination Hours are allocated to all schools; are flexibly deployable across relevant teachers and teams, and based on a sliding scale determined by the school's profiled SET allocation as set out below:

SET Hours weekly	<22	22-44	45-88	89-132	133-176	177-220	221-264	>264
Coordination Hours	1	2	4	6	8	10	12	14

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 within the lifeworld and systemsworld of the school
- 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 a dispersed allocation of SENCO hours, or undefined posts of responsibility. The proposed implementation of a profile-based model of SNA allocation and deployment must be accompanied by appropriate capacity-building measures at school level
- 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
- JMB strongly recommends the establishment of a dedicated ASD and special class advisory team within the new integrated teacher education support service, to support the expanding network of special classes in mainstream settings



8. Inclusive Education Supports

From the ESRI Report:

'Schools are a key arena for tackling and reducing wider socioeconomic inequality by giving all young people an equal opportunity to thrive, but the education system can also perpetuate and exacerbate existing inequality by offering stratified opportunity to young people based on their class background'

'The research points to a need for greater funding for schools serving disadvantaged communities (particularly DEIS schools) and questions the adequacy of modest increases in funding for these schools'

'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'

The impact on schools of having to seek voluntary contributions from families is discussed separately in this submission but in this section, we concentrate on its consequences for families. Last year's Grant Thornton report *'The role of voluntary contributions in post-primary schools in Ireland'*,⁶ and with which the JMB collaborated, unambiguously sets out the effect of such expenditure on hard-pressed families, particularly in the context of social and other disadvantage:

'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.'

As identified in the ESRI report, voluntary secondary schools go, and have always gone, to extraordinary lengths to support students and their families in financial distress while at the same time successfully protecting both dignity and confidentiality in all cases. Such discreet supports to families are mirrored across Irish society by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul who, in their own report *'Closing the Gap: What is needed to end Voluntary Contributions?'*⁷ establish a clear link between family financial pressures and educational access and outcomes:

'SVP annually gives on average €4.5 million to €5million to families and people who are struggling to meet the financial demands of education from early years right through to further and higher education.'

6 <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>

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

Approximately half of that support goes to pupils attending primary and post primary education. Families and services including SVP support those families and students with their educational needs enabling them in the best attempt to create equality, in their educational lives, to those of their peers'

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 into 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 has 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 addresses a critical concern, shared across the post primary management bodies, regarding surplus funding allocation and the future sustainability of the scheme. We acknowledge the Department's dynamic budgetary constraints, particularly its absence of a multi-annual budget, and that section 4.7 of the Guidance Document states that Schools should be aware that a scheme of free schoolbooks for students in Junior Cycle will operate again in 2025/26.

However, we are uncertain about the scheme's longer-term funding, particularly given section 5.1 of the guidance document, which states that the rate of payment applies to the 2024/25 school year only. This uncertainty raises concerns about how schools should responsibly use surplus funds to cover additional learning resources previously funded by parents. Without this clarity, schools may be wise to adopt a prudent and conservative approach to any surplus generated within the scheme, potentially hindering the fulfilment of essential elements of the scheme in subsequent school years to ensure sufficient funding of the core learning resources in the future.

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. It remains to be seen whether the administration time provided-for in the arrangements is sufficient 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:

- **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 school books and materials. Such funding should be secured for the three years of junior cycle on a multi annual basis**
- **We request that a detailed review of the scheme be undertaken in late 2024 with the views of school management comprehended in any revisions to the model**



9. Technology At School

From the ESRI Report:

'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'

'In particular, levels of perceived adequacy of technical support staff were very low, with only 21 per cent of schools where this was perceived to be adequate'

'A range of challenges were raised in relation to technology integration, including inadequate hardware, internet connectivity problems, and students' and teachers' varying levels of technology proficiency'

1. Integrating Technologies

The failure of the Department to issue the annual grant funding under the Digital Strategy for Schools in 2022/23 had a devastating impact on schools locked into ICT support contracts, Wi-Fi infrastructure purchase and maintenance commitments, device replacement, and curricular delivery infrastructure.

The defaulting on such a key commitment under the Strategy is undermining faith in the Department's own commitment to the vital learning outcomes it so strongly emphasises in its own strategic planning documents. Schools must have both certainty and continuity if they are to plan and budget for their infrastructure. Without a fully operational ICT infrastructure, our educators are struggling with not alone teaching and learning, but also with assessment, reporting to parents and SEC, and with intra-school communication flows – all long since migrated to the digital space.

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'. We will not have reached 'digital maturity' however, until the technologies become secondary and invisible. 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 annualised resourcing.

It must be comprehended that top-down, externally mandated policymaking will fail to generate deep change in schools. Digital enhancement of teaching and learning must become a teacher-driven phenomenon. The urgent need for teachers to upskill themselves for remote teaching during the school closures of recent years should not be seen by government as a 'job done', emergency-driven, self-led form of opportunistic CPD, transforming the entire profession into fully developed,

digital age practitioners. What occurred during the closures was remediation, not transformation. What motivates large numbers of teachers to change their practice is seeing that something new is better than what they are currently doing and having the wherewithal to try it. Infrastructure and instruction must go hand-in hand. We have now moved considerably in terms of remote engagement, but this does not translate into the core purpose of technology *in the classroom* – the amplification of engaging and relevant teaching and assessment practices by educators.

The Framework for Junior Cycle has presented a uniquely timed opportunity for teachers to try new methodologies, jointly decide on content with their students, introduce group and dialogic learning, collaborate with peers in subject departments, reconsider assessment modalities, experiment with e-portfolios and a range of other enhancements.

As a new Framework for Senior Cycle now emerges, the Department and school leaders need to concentrate on removing barriers to innovation, facilitating collaborative approaches, and finding digital champions. Teachers themselves will do the rest.

The core tasks demand a stable and predictable resource-base on which to build, and demand that both the Department and our schools commit to the following six foundations:

1. **Invest:** Put relevant and adequate technologies in place. This must be centrally funded but spending locally determined
2. **Facilitate:** Provide every school with time for ICT coordination tasks
3. **Motivate:** Empower teachers. This must also be resourced in terms of digital champions and teacher-release
4. **Plan:** Locate the school on a continuum of digital maturity and set jointly developed, achievable targets for progression
5. **Focus:** Reflect on developments at junior cycle and begin to consider how technologies can be successfully integrated into the emerging Framework for Senior Cycle
6. **Monitor and Evaluate:** Celebrate successes and address deficiencies

As clarity begins to emerge on the nature, scope, and sale of Additional Assessment Components for Leaving Certificate subjects into the future, it is patently obvious that the majority of these will be mediated, generated, stored, and transmitted in digital format.

Our investment must therefore concentrate on ensuring schools' technologies are trustworthy and well-maintained. The Minister and Department must now future-proof 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › 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 development in digitally supported teaching and assessment, on-site technical and administrative support, and enhanced Wi-Fi infrastructure
- › 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, replacement and software upgrading grant
- › 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
- › Grant aid must be restored for the purchasing, maintenance, and support of school administration packages

2. Supporting STEM Education

'... we understand that this news will be disappointing, and we want to assure you that this decision does not diminish the appreciation of the Minister and the Department of the work being done within your school. Your commitment to educational excellence is evident, and we encourage you to continue striving for innovative approaches to STEM education within your school'.

This final sentence in the rejection letter sent this year to hundreds of schools who applied for the Department's *Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Learning Grant for Schools* triggered an understandable wave of frustration and anger amongst our principals. Not alone was the communication strategy around the application process too limited and too late, the quantum of funding wholly inadequate, and the investment of time and energies demanded by the process enormous, the ultimate affront came when it was made clear that the grants were eventually allocated by lottery.

The Department's STEM Education Policy Statement sets our four pillars:

Pillar 1. Nurture learner engagement and participation

Pillar 2. Enhance early years educator and teacher skills

Pillar 3. Support STEM education practice

Pillar 4. Use evidence to support STEM education

Founded on this framework, the *STEM Education Implementation Plan to 2026* lists no fewer than 45 separate actions which, at first glance, represent a heightened degree of seriousness and intent in terms of supporting our schools in, as the rejection letter stated, *'...striving for innovative approaches to STEM education within your school'.*

On closer inspection however, the 45 actions read as follows:

- › Ensure all programmes ...
- › Develop professional learning ...
- › Periodically review ...
- › Engage with communities ...
- › Support existing ...
- › Invite the Teaching Council ...
- › Explore and develop opportunities ...
- › Further develop ...
- › Encourage ...
- › Provision of a central repository ...
- › Develop and roll out ...
- › Develop resources to supplement ...
- › Continued review of ...
- › Continued consideration of ...
- › Identify opportunities for linkages ...
- › Explore the development of ...
- › Continue to provide professional development ...
- › Explore the feasibility of ...
- › Update and relaunch ...
- › Continue to benchmark ...
- › Develop a scheme ...
- › Foster synergies between ...
- › Conduct research on what constitutes ...
- › Conduct a study to identify ...
- › Determine ways of embedding evaluation ...
- › Continued partnership between ...
- › Conduct research into ...
- › Carry out public consultation ...

An entire multi-year STEM education implementation plan with no mention of money.

As evidenced by the overwhelming number of applications to the grant call, schools are crying out for resources to support this education priority and we urge the Minister and government to supplement the Implementation Plan with an investment strategy aligning with the real needs of schools under the four pillars as set out here:

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 schools system.

Pillar 2. Enhance teacher and early years practitioner capacity

The welcome emergence of Oide, the teacher professional learning service, 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 CPD 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 system 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
- › The Inspectorate could promote and model the use of SSE and School Improvement Planning processes to help schools focus on evidence-based ‘achievable’ in advancing this national goal
- › Contemporary STEM education requires that schools are adequately resourced, and the Department should prioritise the provision of:
 1. Laboratory Assistants
 2. Dedicated time for teachers involved in STEM projects with their students
 3. Annualised equipment replacement and software upgrading grants
 4. Appropriate laboratory-class space and storage areas
 5. Dedicated time to coordinate STEM teaching and activities, including health and safety compliance



10. Infrastructural Constraints

From the ESRI Report:

'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'

'Interviews with school leaders also highlighted concerns related to meeting day-to-day costs such as heating and insurance, as well as challenges in maintaining old and often unsuitable school buildings built for a different era'

'Our school is 160 years old, maintaining those buildings is a challenge'

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 now in need of major refurbishment and extensions. Projections show that we can expect a continuing increase in enrolments at second level up as far as 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. While the Modular and Reconfiguration Programme is welcome, JMB is also concerned with the decrease in the number of approvals for Additional Accommodation projects. We urge 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.

In addition, the Additional Accommodation Scheme needs to be expanded to allow for General Purpose/ Dining Areas, staffrooms, and offices for additional Deputy Principals.

JMB has welcomed in the past the commitment to deliver a programme to build and modernise PE and school sport facilities but we are disappointed that we still await details of such a programme, much to the frustration of our school communities, many of whom have now introduced Physical Education as an optional subject for Leaving Certificate.

Schools also require funding for the replacement of sports equipment which is becoming old and obsolete. Such equipment can very specialised and costly but there is no scheme in place unless a new sports hall is being built – a very rare occurrence. JMB believes that such funding should be available on an ongoing basis in a similar way to funding for replacement furniture, fittings, and fixtures.

In particular, the difficulty in getting phone-calls or emails responded-to by the Planning and Building Unit remains a significant concern for school authorities. The JMB has welcomed the Department's 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 several hundred primary schools in addition to our own voluntary secondary schools, but extra resources are required to adequately meet all the challenges on a day-to-day basis.

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 must be increased substantially so that a far greater number of schools can benefit from the programme on an annual basis
- › A new Summer Works Scheme is long overdue. The longer the delay in providing a new scheme, the greater the cost to the State will be in the longer term. It is also a matter of regret that applications made by schools for certain categories of works under the 2019 Scheme have still not been addressed
- › The grants to schools for the installation of Solar Panels are welcome. However, it is regrettable that the number of solar panels awarded to each school remains the same irrespective of the size of the premises
- › The Minor Works Grant for secondary schools which was introduced as a Covid measure, should be re-introduced and continued on an annual basis. It is regrettable that the recent announcement by the Minister did not include post primary schools for an allocation of minor works grants even though the Minister's stated that *"Minor works payments are a vital resource in terms of supporting the operation of schools generally."*
- › The cost of repairs to schools, especially repairs to roofs and heating systems, is escalating all the time due to the lack of designated funding for a proper maintenance programme in each school. The recent announcement by the Minister stating that the Planning and Building Unit is currently finalising updated guidance for schools in relation to good practice for maintenance of school buildings is welcome but will be of no use unless resources for maintenance programmes are provided
- › The promised PE Hall build and modernisation programme as promised in 'Project Ireland' be commenced without delay so that all post-primary schools have access to facilities to support PE provision
- › A General Purpose Area/Dining Area 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 cases of a permanent building
- › The School 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
- › That support for the JMB School Building Projects Advisory Service be increased so that the service can adequately support not alone our voluntary secondary schools, but also the many hundreds of primary schools that now avail of the service

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. The recently published ESRI Report *'Embracing Diversity in all its Forms': The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education (2024)* provides 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 tracks the findings of the ESRI report and presents the case for sufficient resourcing to enable schools to continue to bring 'value and values to the nation's education system'. In this submission, the JMB prioritises the need for additional deputy principal capacity in post-primary schools and adequate index-linked funding of our schools to enable schools to meet the many challenges described in the report.

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.

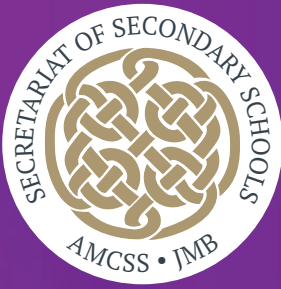
We believe that all per capita grant funding of education should be inflation-proofed by being consumer price index-linked on an annual basis and that funding of education should be of a sufficient proportion of the nation's GNI* to eliminate the need for voluntary contributions to make up a deficit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

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| ➤ Leadership Challenges | ➤ Senior Cycle Redevelopment |
| ➤ Investment in Schools | ➤ Additional/Special Educational Needs |
| ➤ Resources and Funding | ➤ Inclusive Education Supports |
| ➤ COVID-19 Experiences & Impact | ➤ Technology At School |
| ➤ Junior Cycle Framework | ➤ Infrastructural Constraints |

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 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 2024



Summary of Recommendations

JMB Pre-Budget Submission 2025



Summary of Recommendations

JMB Pre-Budget Submission 2025

Contributing to the Nation: Value and Values

The recently published ESRI Report *'Embracing Diversity in all its Forms': The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education (2024)* provides 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.

Our Pre-Budget Submission 2025 draws on the following headline findings of the report and sets out the perspective of the Joint Managerial Body as reflecting the key issues at stake in our shared national enterprise:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Leadership Challenges | 6. Senior Cycle Redevelopment |
| 2. Investment in Schools | 7. Additional/Special Educational Needs |
| 3. Resources and Funding | 8. Inclusive Education Supports |
| 4. COVID-19 Experiences & Impact | 9. Technology At School |
| 5. Junior Cycle Framework | 10. Infrastructural Constraints |



1. Leadership Challenges

The JMB, as its highest budgetary priority, 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.

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.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › Management and administrative functions, while often burdensome, cannot be mediated in isolation from the vision and values underpinning leadership
- › 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 by enhancing capacity at deputy principal level
- › 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
- › JMB is seeking an independent review of the principal's workload and responsibilities, their wellbeing and psychological health, professional preparation and development, support structures, step-down and exit-routes, and making recommendations for the remediation of an emerging principal recruitment and retention crisis



2. Investment in Schools

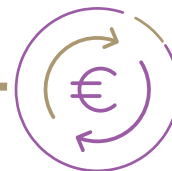
The ESRI report cites Ireland's expenditure on secondary education [as a proportion of Modified Gross National Income (GNI*)] as having moved close to the EU average of 1.8%. That said, a system-school dialogue will always be required to maintain a focus around effective targeting of the Budget's annual Education Vote, and to build in to this dialogue much greater degrees of responsiveness and agility.

In engaging with the Department and its agencies around the teacher supply issue, the JMB sees significant evidence that this very real crisis, particularly in the greater Dublin region, is being taken very seriously by the Minister, her Secretary General, and their officials. In terms of immediate actions, JMB supports the Department, the Teaching Council, and other relevant agencies in addressing teacher supply challenges from as many approaches as possible.

In the longer 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 pupil-teacher ratio to be allocated-for and staffed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › The two-year PME programme must be 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
- › 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 in recent years and to support a continuing recovery in terms of the learning loss experienced by this generation of students
- › 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



3. Resources and Funding

Future historians will look back on the anachronistic practice of schools having to seek voluntary contributions from parents to offset the deficit in their state funding as a bewildering phenomenon. One report after another, one agency after another, cites the practice as pressuring and degrading both for families and for the schools who must approach them for such support.

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.

Meanwhile, significant inflationary pressures have been impacting on school budgets for the past three years and the JMB urges, as an immediate measure, the index-linking of all capitation grants to allow schools to enable schools to meet their financial obligations and to engage in effective resource management.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › **A commencement must be made to address the inequitable funding of schools in the Voluntary Secondary sector by initiating the Equalisation process already conceded by government**
- › **All per-capita grant aid to schools must be inflation-proofed by being consumer price index-linked on an annual basis**
- › **Schools in the fee-charging sector are generally grant-aided at either 50% or 0% of the rest of the voluntary secondary sector and this policy should be reviewed in light of the financial pressures on many such schools**
- › **A government-level commitment must be made to eliminating, over a three-year period, the need for schools to seek voluntary contributions from families**



4. COVID-19 Experiences & Impact

The further we get from the immediate experiences of the Covid pandemic, the greater the risk of denying its long-term impact on young people. 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. At school level, serious concern is emerging 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.

It is against this backdrop that the JMB has been calling for the provision of fully qualified psychotherapeutic services to schools. The optimal model is where a trained psychotherapist engages over an extended time with a school community, becomes embedded in the professional life of its educators, and develops co-professional relationship with teachers, meeting with parents, and providing appropriate therapeutic supports to relevant students.

JMB also 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 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 piloting of a scheme to deploy emotional counselling/therapeutic supports in primary schools to address trauma, anxiety, and mental health difficulties of vulnerable children and young people
- In the absence of such an expansion, we are seeking a model of accessing of psychotherapeutic services in line with the proposals of the ICP (March 2024): 'ICP urges the Minister to put in place a trialling of psychotherapy services purchased by grant-aid into a set of post-primary schools, with a review of its effectiveness to be carried out following a year of implementation'.
- JMB seeks a meaningful increase in provision for guidance counselling, as well as therapeutic 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
- 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
- In implementing their anti-bullying policies as set out in the Department's new Cineáltas framework, schools' most pressing needs centre on time and expertise. School management requires the capacity to free-up relevant staff 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



5. Junior Cycle Framework

The significant concurrence between the findings of the ESRI report on voluntary secondary schools and the Third Interim Report outcomes from the University of Limerick's 4-year longitudinal study *'Exploring the Introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle'* points to a growing realisation of the realities of large-scale curricular change and the lessons we can learn for the future.

While it is accepted that the Minister and Department will await more definitive and perhaps final outcomes and recommendations from the UL longitudinal study before enacting any significant change, the JMB seeks to set out its own position on future directions for policy in the following recommendations:

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › The ESRI report and the findings of the longitudinal study 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, even at this interim phase
- › The evident incoherence between curricular intentions and the summative arrangements at junior cycle require immediate attention, and not awaiting the publication of the final report from the longitudinal study
- › 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 liberated, developed, and supported in their role
- › Scheduling of SLAR meetings continues to be a contested issue at school level. Agreement on a framework for scheduling SLAR meetings that protects tuition time must be achieved as a matter of priority
- › The Department should put in place high quality professional learning and post-graduate development opportunities for contemporary teachers in SPHE and in RSE, a requirement of junior cycle Wellbeing provision and now at senior cycle from 2024
- › ITE programmes should comprehend SPHE education and professional diploma programmes should be scaled-up nationally



6. Senior Cycle Redevelopment

The language of redevelopment, as opposed to reform, points to the delicate balance that must be achieved in bringing our post-compulsory phase of education into a more relevant and engaging space while still retaining public and professional confidence.

Each of the current and forthcoming developments at senior cycle make significant demands on the timetabling capacity of schools and, in particular, on the capacity of senior leadership to deliver on this crucial national enterprise. Meanwhile, 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. What must follow 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:

- › **The Minister and Department must acknowledge that effective communication is key to success in terms of rapid and deep curricular change at senior cycle. This will require:**
 - Timely updates from the Department and its agencies
 - Empowerment of principals and deputies in terms of school-wide advocacy for change
 - An authentic partnership approach to supporting parents' understanding of the changes already underway
 - Enhancement of guidance counselling provision to support individual and group decision-making in progression to senior cycle
- › **The call for timeliness in the ESRI report points to an experience of late announcement of significant change with little or no time for planning, scheduling, communication, and staff deployment across schools. Policymakers and those at the political level must comprehend the complex dynamics of school leadership and management and set more realistic expectations in terms of timeframes**
- › **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:**
 - implementing the revised SPHE specification
 - scheduling of more flexible LCA and LCVP programmes
 - reviewing and implementing new Transition Year programmes
 - finding time for connections with the work of work and enterprise
 - finding time for additional assessment components
- › **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**



7. Additional/Special Educational Needs

In light of the publication of the landmark NCSE paper '*An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society*' and its adoption as Department policy by both Ministers, the direction of travel is now absolutely clear – our school system will require to adapt itself to a radical conceptualisation of inclusion and the process of realising this goal begins now.

Both levers, the NCSE paper and the EPSSEN review, carry hugely significant implications for schools, and in particular, for school management. Each one of the sixteen recommendations set out in the policy paper (and presumably to be soon underpinned by legislation and circular) carries new and additional levels of responsibility for principals, deputy principals, and Boards of Management. In pointing out the challenges to this national inclusion agenda and our recommendations, the JMB seeks to support its goals, not undermine them.

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 within the lifeworld and systemsworld of the school
- 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 a dispersed allocation of SENCO hours, or undefined posts of responsibility. The proposed implementation of a profile-based model of SNA allocation and deployment must be accompanied by appropriate capacity-building measures at school level
- 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
- JMB strongly recommends the establishment of a dedicated ASD and special class advisory team within the new integrated teacher education support service, to support the expanding network of special classes in mainstream settings



8. Inclusive Education Supports

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 into 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 has 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **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 school books and materials. Such funding should be secured for the three years of junior cycle on a multi annual basis**
- **We request that a detailed review of the scheme be undertaken in late 2024 with the views of school management comprehended in any revisions to the model**



9. Technology At School

The failure of the Department to issue the annual grant funding under the Digital Strategy for Schools in 2022/23 had a devastating impact on schools locked into ICT support contracts, Wi-Fi infrastructure purchase and maintenance commitments, device replacement, and curricular delivery infrastructure. The defaulting on such a key commitment under the Strategy is undermining faith in the Department's own commitment to the vital learning outcomes it so strongly emphasises in its own strategic planning documents. Schools must have both certainty and continuity if they are to plan and budget for their infrastructure.

Meanwhile, the rejection letter sent this year to hundreds of schools who applied for the Department's *Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Learning Grant for Schools* triggered an understandable wave of frustration and anger amongst our principals. Not alone was the communication strategy around the application process too limited and too late, the quantum of funding wholly inadequate, and the investment of time and energies demanded by the process enormous, the ultimate affront came when it was made clear that the grants were eventually allocated by lottery.

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:

- › 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 development in digitally supported teaching and assessment, on-site technical and administrative support, and enhanced Wi-Fi infrastructure
- › 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, replacement and software upgrading grant
- › 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
- › Grant aid must be restored for the purchasing, maintenance, and support of school administration packages
- › 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
- › The Inspectorate could promote and model the use of SSE and School Improvement Planning processes to help schools focus on evidence-based ‘achievable’ in advancing this national goal
- › Contemporary STEM education requires that schools are adequately resourced, and the Department should prioritise the provision of:
 1. Laboratory Assistants
 2. Dedicated time for teachers involved in STEM projects with their students
 3. Annualised equipment replacement and software upgrading grants
 4. Appropriate laboratory-class space and storage areas
 5. Dedicated time to coordinate STEM teaching and activities, including health and safety compliance



10. Infrastructural Constraints

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 now in need of major refurbishment and extensions. Projections show that we can expect a continuing increase in enrolments at second level up as far as 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.

Meanwhile, the difficulty in getting phone-calls or emails responded-to by the Planning and Building Unit remains a significant concern for school authorities. The JMB has welcomed the Department's 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 several hundred primary schools in addition to our own voluntary secondary schools, but extra resources are required to adequately meet all the challenges on a day-to-day basis.

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 must be increased substantially so that a far greater number of schools can benefit from the programme on an annual basis
- › A new Summer Works Scheme is long overdue. The longer the delay in providing a new scheme, the greater the cost to the State will be in the longer term. It is also a matter of regret that applications made by schools for certain categories of works under the 2019 Scheme have still not been addressed
- › The grants to schools for the installation of Solar Panels are welcome. However, it is regrettable that the number of solar panels awarded to each school remains the same irrespective of the size of the premises
- › The Minor Works Grant for secondary schools which was introduced as a Covid measure, should be re-introduced and continued on an annual basis. It is regrettable that the recent announcement by the Minister did not include post primary schools for an allocation of minor works grants even though the Minister's stated that *"Minor works payments are a vital resource in terms of supporting the operation of schools generally."*
- › The cost of repairs to schools, especially repairs to roofs and heating systems, is escalating all the time due to the lack of designated funding for a proper maintenance programme in each school. The recent announcement by the Minister stating that the Planning and Building Unit is currently finalising updated guidance for schools in relation to good practice for maintenance of school buildings is welcome but will be of no use unless resources for maintenance programmes are provided
- › The promised PE Hall build and modernisation programme as promised in 'Project Ireland' be commenced without delay so that all post-primary schools have access to facilities to support PE provision
- › A General Purpose Area/Dining Area 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 cases of a permanent building
- › The School 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
- › That support for the JMB School Building Projects Advisory Service be increased so that the service can adequately support not alone our voluntary secondary schools, but also the many hundreds of primary schools that now avail of the service

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