



JMB Pre-Budget Submission 2024



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Priorities for Sustainability



GOAL 1:

Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings



GOAL 2

Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential



GOAL 3

Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sectors

Summary of Recommendations

This JMB Pre-Budget Submission 2024 tracks the key high-level goals of *Forbairt*, the Department of Education's Annual Statement of Priorities 2023. *Forbairt* sets out the immediate goals for this year targeted by the Department under its overarching *Statement of Strategy 2021- 2023*.

GOAL 1:

Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings

1. Provision of High-Quality Education

While Ireland's expenditure on secondary education [as a proportion of Modified Gross National Income (GNI*)] has moved close to the EU average of 1.8%, 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 the responsiveness and agility demonstrated during the pandemic period. Our submission points to a range of such efficiencies from the perspective of secondary school management.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › All per-capita grant aid to schools must be inflation-proofed by being consumer price index-linked on an annual basis
- › 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

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

2. Sustainable Leadership and Management in Our Schools

The JMB is seeking a commitment in Budget 2024 to the elimination of the practice of allocating a fraction of a deputy principal to schools. Incredibly, schools with enrolments near 400 students do not have a full deputy principal post.

JMB has made a submission to the Minister and her Department outlining our prioritising of deputy principal positions across all schools. We urge the Minister to give serious consideration to both the rationale for such enhancements, as well as to the cost-effectiveness of the model.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › JMB is seeking an independent review of the principal's workload and responsibilities, their wellbeing and psychological health, professional preparation and development, support structures and exit-routes, and making recommendations for urgent remediation of the current recruitment and retention crises
- › JMB strongly urges the Department to immediately end the practice of allocating a fraction of a deputy principal to schools of up to 400 students
- › The JMB submission to the Minister, outlining our prioritising of deputy principal positions across schools of all capacities, should receive serious consideration in respect of staffing allocations in 2024
- › JMB strongly recommends that the Department considers the ongoing enormous pressure on school principals before initiating any further significant policy agendas impacting on their workload, and commits to strengthening the senior leadership team as a measure to alleviate this pressure



Summary of Recommendations [continued]

3. Investing in our Curriculum

JMB is proposing an independent review of the two-year PME programme structure. We accept that the system will not revert to a one-year post-graduate model of ITE, but we need to determine the scope for a more fit-for-purpose placement, or 'apprenticeship' model in terms of depth, rather than breadth, of in-school experience in the programme's second year, as well as cost mitigation by remunerating student teachers on placement as in nursing and other professional development programmes.

A comprehensive programme of training and additional resources is required to support Boards of Management to carry out their responsibilities in a range of areas including as leaders of teaching for learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- While current, high-level approaches by the Department of Education will have long-term effects, JMB urges central government to implement immediate alleviation strategies to assist in teacher recruitment and retention for the forthcoming school year
- In particular, addressing the cost-base of becoming and continuing as a teacher will require the serious and immediate attention of government as it is acting as a barrier to much-needed social diversity across the profession
- In the interim, the Department and Inspectorate should prepare guidelines for schools on how to make provision for a range of curricular subjects, and Guidance Counselling in light of the current severe teacher supply crisis in these areas
- A comprehensive programme of training and additional resources is required to support Boards of Management to oversee the provision of high-quality education and to strive to continuously improve the learning experience of students in our schools
- The scope and scale of curricular change at post-primary will demand an enhancement of each school's senior leadership team to ensure access, participation, and positive outcomes for all

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

3.1 Renewal of 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.

A 'back to normal' agenda ignores some key issues facing school communities and the evidence of principal perspectives shared with the JMB points to an immediate and urgent need for professionalised mental health and emotional supports in our schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › 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
- › 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 in schools from September 2023
- › ITE programmes should comprehend SPHE education and professional diploma programmes such as currently offered by DCU, should be scaled-up nationally

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

3.2 Renewal of Senior Cycle

JMB is conscious that the NCCA's Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report, published by the Minister over a year ago, represents a significant milestone in the journey towards an eventual Framework for Senior Cycle. We are, however, concerned at the lack of communication on key aspects of its implementation, the delay in identifying network schools, and on establishing consultative structures around all aspects of this vital national enterprise.

In reflecting on a senior cycle reform agenda, our school leaders paid explicit attention to the logistics of change, the professional learning required and the operability or otherwise of implementation demands.

RECOMMENDATION:

- › The Minister and Department should immediately develop and implement a communications strategy to ensure post-primary schools are updated on developments and included in decision-making

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

3.3 Supporting STEM Education

In *Forbairt*, the Department has committed to ‘publish and commence delivery of the STEM Education Implementation Plan’ this year.

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
- To broaden the curriculum to include an adequate range of STEM subjects, schools will require both an advance staffing allocation and specialist facilities where subjects new to their curriculum are being established
- 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. Teacher leadership posts to coordinate STEM teaching and activities, including health and safety compliance

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

3.4 Supporting Literacy and Numeracy

Schools have a responsibility to families and investment in engaging adults and parents more fully in the school enterprise will pay dividends in terms of community support and literacy outcomes across both the student population and their families. All schools should have a well-stocked and attractive library, centrally located, and staffed by enthusiastic and skilled promoters of reading and literacy approaches.

Teachers, however, continue to report a need for a block of time in the first term of 1st year to ensure that *all* students are brought to a functional level of skill in numerical functions, basic algebra, and geometry.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › All schools should have a well-stocked and attractive library, centrally located, and staffed by enthusiastic and skilled promoters of reading and literacy approaches
- › JMB is urgently seeking the expansion to post-primary of the free-books provision currently being implemented at primary level
- › Specific measures and supports to address the language, literacy and numeracy needs of students from the Traveller and Ukrainian communities are urgently required
- › The slow dismantling of the JCSP programme in schools is of serious concern to JMB and should be reversed at policy level as a matter of urgency

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

GOAL 2:

Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

1. Guidance & Counselling Services

It is important at this time to point out that there exist high levels of damage to mental health in our society not alone due to the enduring effects of the pandemic lockdowns and school closures, 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 etc.

JMB is now seeking a meaningful increase in provision for guidance and counselling in the face of a generation of students with unprecedented needs in terms of trauma recovery, metacognitive skills loss, career plan damage and a raft of other crises attributable in part to the pandemic, as well as the new challenges of traumatised refugee children and an emerging senior cycle demanding significant guidance counselling in terms of expanded course choices and progression routes.



Summary of Recommendations [continued]

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
- An independent review of the mismatch between guidance counselling allocations and the psycho-social needs of contemporary students must be instituted as a matter of priority
- 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
- 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
- JMB urges the Department to support the training of new guidance counsellors, particularly in light of (a) the cost to individual teachers and (b) substituted release for training, supervision, and work-shadowing
- In implementing their anti-bullying policies as set out in the Department's 2013 procedures, schools' most pressing needs centre on time and expertise. School management requires the substitution 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

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

2. Special and Additional Educational Needs

As a matter of urgency, the Department must make distinct provision for SEN team leadership, management, and coordination. JMB has repeatedly asserted the need for dedicated special needs coordination, planning, tracking, consultation, communication, and reporting in every school, and this position is supported by the NCSE.

Our contention is that the 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › The landscape of SEN provision was radically worsened by the Covid pandemic and schools must now face the challenges of supporting students from Ukraine. JMB urges that the adequacy of the SET and EAL allocation to schools be reviewed in light of these challenges and that adequate provision be made to ensure the levels of provision such vulnerable students deserve
- › 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 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

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

3. Expansion to Post Primary of the Pilot Scheme for Student Emotional Therapeutic Supports

There needs to be emotional counselling and therapeutic supports available in all DEIS schools as a first step, and then beyond, as a key support for the mental health strain and trauma experienced by so many of our children. Ireland is radically out of step with many European countries who provide these services in schools. This is not addressed by NEPS or career guidance allocation increases, as neither provide or are suitable to provide ongoing individual therapeutic supports for trauma and complex emotional needs.

RECOMMENDATION:

- The JMB urges the Minister to expand into post-primary the proposed 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

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

4. Voluntary Secondary Schools in the DEIS Programme

The impact of policy and initiative overload on schools within the DEIS programme is but one of a number of challenges facing school management in such settings. What is far more concerning, however, is the effect of higher levels of student behavioural challenges due to emotional, social, and cognitive-capacity issues which erode the time and energies of the DEIS school leader, particularly in our underfunded and understaffed voluntary secondary schools.

As an immediate action, JMB is calling on the Department to allocate a full deputy principal in all DEIS schools of up to 400 students. JMB urges the Minister to implement this equity measure for the forthcoming academic year and to broaden its scope to include all schools with fractions of deputy principal positions thereafter.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- DEIS school principals worked tirelessly during the pandemic and they must, as a matter of urgency, be provided with acceptable levels of senior leadership support to allow them and their school communities to survive the extreme challenges in the wake of this crisis
- We seek, as an immediate action, the allocation of a full deputy principal in all schools of up to 400 students and the allocation of a second deputy principal to schools within the DEIS Programme with enrolments of between 400 and 599 students
- The Department's reconfiguration of the DEIS scheme must go further to provide for a more equitable framework for addressing disadvantage. The all-or-nothing approach to DEIS inclusion must be reviewed to provide schools with high numbers of students experiencing disadvantage with targeted supports

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

GOAL 3

Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector

1. Eliminating the Need for Voluntary Contributions

The Minister and government must understand that voluntary secondary school communities are suffering due to long-standing, systemic underfunding and that the capacity of families to replace the monies denied by the state to this post-primary sector alone has now all but gone. As energy costs for families increase and general cost-of-living inflation spirals, it is becoming increasingly difficult on every level, including moral, for schools to seek voluntary subscriptions from hard-pressed families to make up a deficit unnecessarily created by government in its unequal funding of schools by sector.

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 conceded by government
- › JMB urges the immediate consumer price index-linking of all capitation grants to ensure that schools have sufficient cashflow and financial resources to operate successfully
- › A government-level commitment must be made to eliminating, over a three-year period, the need for schools to seek voluntary contributions from families

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

2. Supporting Digital Literacy

At the heart of the educative enterprise lies the quality of engaged learning that takes place within the classroom – everything else is tangential. We have been focused for too long on hardware, software, Wi-Fi networks etc. Teachers will always maintain a focus on pedagogy. Our investment should concentrate there, with the technologies trustworthy and well-maintained. The Minister and Department must future-proof technological investment in schools and not leave students' life-chances to the lottery of their school's or their family's financial capacity.

In this context, JMB is anxious that the delayed release of the 2023 ICT Grant to schools is not repeated in subsequent years.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › To underpin the three pillars of the new Digital Strategy for Schools, adequate 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 is anxious that the delayed release of the 2023 ICT Grant to schools is not repeated in subsequent years
- › 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

3. Buildings and Infrastructure

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.

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

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 or those projects need to be transferred to the major capital programme for attention. JMB welcomes that this approach has been taken in a number of instances over the past year, but a greater number of schools require this whole-school approach.
- Funding for the Schools Energy Retrofit Pathfinder Programme be increased substantially so that a far greater number of schools can benefit from the programme on an annual basis.
- The promised new Summer Works Scheme, with its increased focus on climate targets and the installation of solar panels be made available to all schools at the earliest possible date while a new scheme should also provide for the 'traditional' categories.
- The Minor Works Grant for secondary schools which was introduced as a Covid measure, should be re-introduced, and continued on an annual basis.
- The promised PE Hall building 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 all schools be continued but that efforts be made to shorten the period from approval to construction in the cases of a permanent building.
- Funding be provided for the Prefab Replacement Scheme
- 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.

Summary of Recommendations [continued]

4. Adult & Further Education

JMB and ACCS FE-providing schools have been working closely together to establish sound working relationships with DE, FESS, SOLAS and QQI and, in a major step forward, JMB and ACCS have set up a Further Education Support Unit.

RECOMMENDATION:

- As the landscape of national employment levels and PLC uptake change, JMB, along with our ACCS colleagues, is anxious that the staffing of further and adult education provision is placed on a sounder policy-level footing than currently, and that any changed funding arrangements be fully consulted upon in advance of implementation.



JMB Pre-Budget Submission 2024

Priorities for
Sustainability



Introduction

Systems have an innate tendency to want to re-set following a shock. We hear this in phrases such as 'back to normal', 'the new normal', and even 'post-pandemic recovery'. Voices from our schools however confirm that individuals, families, and communities, are not systems. They are souls.

The Lifeworld of the school is frequently contrasted with the Systemsworld of policy. This is a false dichotomy, as each is deeply enmeshed with the other. The relational and performative ecology of a school community is profoundly complex and sensitive to trauma and the Covid comet has, and will continue to have, an extremely long tail. Pretending it doesn't and pressing ahead with a 'back to normal' agenda will have devastating consequences for the mental and spiritual health of our school communities.

One of the key tasks, therefore, is to reframe, and even reinvent, the policy-practitioner relationship. We, at school community level, should begin to better comprehend the Systemsworld by acknowledging the need for authentic partnership with the Department and its agencies and to shift our perspective closer to the truth that we all need each other.

The Systemsworld partners should equally build bridges into the Lifeworld of our nation's schools. What does it feel like to be an overwhelmed, permanently worried, contemporary school principal? What emotional and psychological impact has the fractured experience of schooling had on a 14-year-old boy in a DEIS school? How can we recognise and address invisible learning loss, especially in quiet and well-behaved girls? Why have secondary schools no access to emotional therapy for their students? What is it like to spend your working day teaching in a sub-standard building? Why have half our secondary schools no full-sized gym? How will mainstream schools cope with a new population of autistic teenagers, some of whom are non-verbal and sometimes physically acting-out?

Most importantly, who is looking at the big picture? The System comprises solely of silos following their own mandates. A school's Lifeworld is precious and precarious but lives out its mission on an entirely different plane.

Our Pre-Budget Submission 2024 sets out to bridge the gap in empathic understanding between the worlds of policy and practice. Its audience is the Department of Education, the Minister, and our Government. We are your schools, your children, your educators, and your families.

Our submission tracks the key high-level goals of *Forbairt*, our Department of Education's Annual Statement of Priorities 2023. *Forbairt* sets out the immediate goals for this year targeted by our Department under its overarching *Statement of Strategy 2021- 2023*.

The three overarching goals are:



GOAL 1:

Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings



GOAL 2

Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential



GOAL 3

Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sectors

What follows is *our* set of sustainability priorities for your serious consideration.



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings

1. Provision of High-Quality Education

The Minister opens the Forbairt statement of priorities with our shared commitment:

Our core vision is an education system in which every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential

Forbairt, indeed, emphasises the centrality of partnership throughout – a positive legacy of the intense collaboration and student-centred agency demonstrated during the pandemic challenges.

While Ireland's expenditure on secondary education [as a proportion of Modified Gross National Income (GNI*)] has moved close to the EU average of 1.8%, 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 the responsiveness and agility demonstrated during the pandemic period. The present submission points to a range of such efficiencies from the perspective of secondary school management.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- All per-capita grant aid to schools must be inflation-proofed by being consumer price index-linked on an annual basis
- 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



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings
[continued]

2. Sustainable Leadership and Management in Our Schools

'The position of school principal in the majority of Irish schools is, in my view, beyond the capacity of any person to manage on their own.

What other chief executive has to respond 24/7, 365 days a year, if the alarm goes off in their place of work at 4.00am? Who else has to spend their summers overseeing 'summer works' where contractors upgrade some part of the building? And is it feasible to have one person spending much of the summer seeking teachers to fill vital subjects on the curriculum, often to find at the end of an interview process that the successful candidate withdraws? Not to mind the time spent managing fundraising events organised by parents to help keep the school open and heated.'

This commentary from Dr Brian Mooney¹, a teacher of over 40 years' experience, points to a growing public awareness of the crisis in school principalship – a phenomenon long obvious to those close to our schools.

It is obvious also to the nation's teachers, who see assistant or deputy principalship positions as achievable and sustainable but see principalship as an impossible proposition. They are simply not applying, and in the 2022 recruitment season, certain school Trusts report that approximately 60% of their principalship vacancies had to be readvertised, while deputy principalship applications remain buoyant.

This is not solely an Irish problem, there exists a crisis in school principal recruitment in many countries. In the UK, following the tragic death of a school principal following an adverse school inspection, her family² said: '... we are in no doubt that Ruth's death was a direct result of the pressure put on her by the process and outcome of an Ofsted inspection at her school'. And as if to crystallise the lifeworld-systemsworld collision, one of her colleagues said 'there needs to be a change in the system. It's just like a spreadsheet – they put data in, and the data comes out, but actually we're talking about children, families, teachers'.

The Irish Inspectorate thankfully engages with our schools under a much more appropriate and supportive paradigm than that of Ofsted, but what both systems have in common is a systematic reliance on a single, identifiable, person at the apex of an inverted, and unsustainable, pyramid of responsibility and accountability.

The JMB has established a network of peer-support principal groups across our ten regions, each co-led by a principal and a group analytical psychotherapist. Once they get to know their groups and hear their case stories, our therapists employ the same descriptor of principalship right across the country: 'it's punishing'.

1 <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2023/03/28/i-feel-burnt-out-after-just-four-years-of-working-as-school-principal-what-can-i-do/>

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/mar/21/ruth-perry-ofsted-regime-fatally-flawed-says-family-of-headteacher-who-killed-herself>



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings [continued]

We need not rehearse here the ever-growing list of demands on our principals. The JMB has argued for decades for an alleviation of the principal's workload. In advance of the Citizen's Assembly for Education as set out in the Programme for Government, JMB is now seeking an independent review of the principal's workload and responsibilities, their wellbeing and psychological health, professional preparation and development, support structures and exit-routes, and making recommendations for urgent remediation of the current recruitment and retention crisis.

As an immediate measure, JMB is seeking a commitment in Budget 2024 to the elimination of the practice of allocating a fraction of a deputy principal to schools. Incredibly, schools with enrolments near 400 students do not have a full deputy principal post. In schools with a fraction of a deputy post, savings could be made by prioritising such senior leadership roles over the assistant principal element of a school's allocation and we are happy to explore this possibility further, but we strongly urge the Department to implement a scheduled commitment to end this unacceptable model of allocation.

JMB has made a submission to the Minister and her Department outlining our prioritising of deputy principal positions across schools of all capacities. We urge the Minister to give serious consideration to both the rationale for such enhancements, as well as to the cost-effectiveness of the model. In essence, the JMB and our other management body colleagues are seeking a substantial investment in the senior leadership team throughout the system in the form of additional deputy principals along with the elimination of the practice of allocating fractions of such posts.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › JMB is seeking an independent review of the principal's workload and responsibilities, their wellbeing and psychological health, professional preparation and development, support structures and exit-routes, and making recommendations for urgent remediation of an emerging headteacher recruitment and retention crisis
- › JMB strongly urges the Department to immediately end the practice of allocating a fraction of a deputy principal to schools of up to 400 students
- › The JMB submission to the Minister, outlining our prioritising of deputy principal positions across schools of all capacities, should receive serious consideration in respect of staffing allocations in 2024
- › JMB strongly recommends that the Department considers the ongoing enormous pressure on school principals before initiating any further significant policy agendas impacting on their workload, and commits to strengthening the senior leadership team as a measure to alleviate this pressure



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings
[continued]

3. Investing in our Curriculum

What is the curriculum?

‘Equating curriculum with syllabus reduces it to content or lists. Curriculum is the totality of experience the student has as a result of the provisions made. A curriculum for education in a democratic society, provides a liberating experience focusing on freedom and independence of thought; social and political empowerment; respect for the freedom and opinion of others and enrichment of life from whatever class or creed’.

This framing of curriculum by AV Kelly³ as ‘the totality of experience the student has as a result of the provisions made’ reminds the system that the school must fulfil its obligations to authentic holism, and not just to those aspects of provision that can be written down, assessed, externally evaluated, measured, or indeed budgeted-for.

Kelly’s second point should represent a wake-up call to all governments that underinvestment in the totality of the curricular experience will undermine democracy, tolerance, political engagement, and, ultimately, our civic freedoms.

In renewing our curriculums therefore, there is much at stake, and the impact of the crisis in teacher supply equally represents a risk factor that can no longer be ignored by government. The Department of Education is doing all it can, but creative solutions must now be employed by central government and, in particular, the Department of Public Expenditure, if this one and only chance for our students to receive a quality education is not to be severely undermined for the second time in their young lives, following from the pandemic disruptions.

The Department is currently consulting-on and developing a successor to the 2011 Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, which doubled the length of post-graduate ITE courses to two years.

The 2011 Strategy was generally seen by stakeholders to have been put in place as a response to publication of the PISA 2009 reading literacy outcomes for 15-year-olds. Ireland’s mean reading score in 2009 was 495.6 which, though not significantly different from the then OECD average of 493.4, nonetheless represented a fall of some 31 points from Ireland’s previous PISA literacy assessment in 2000. Similarly, our score in mathematics of 487.1 indicated a significant drop from the 2003 figure of 503 and represented a placing below the OECD average of 495.9.

3 Kelly, A.V. (2004) *The Curriculum: theory and practice*. Sage Publications, London



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings [continued]

It is now accepted that the then PISA outcomes had been impacted-upon by factors such as:

- › Changes in the school-going population, with a larger cohort of ‘newcomer’ students than in 2000
- › Changes in the curriculum (e.g., a drop in the numbers of 15-year-olds in 5th year due to a greater uptake of TY by more able students at the time)
- › Changes in the linking and scaling methodologies used in PISA
- › The inclusion in 2009 of eight ‘low scoring schools’ not present in earlier samples, and,
- › The possibility of random fluctuations

While the PISA tests represented one set of test results at one time, corroborating evidence of reported deficiencies in these areas had also been produced from:

- › A Department-commissioned report by the ERC on ‘*2009 National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading*’, and,
- › The Inspectorate’s: ‘*Incidental Inspection Findings 2010 – A report on the Teaching and Learning of English and Mathematics in Primary Schools*’

Thus, caveats apart, there was clearly work to be done following the ‘PISA Shock’, and the 2011 Strategy at least set out a framework for action, subsequently receiving general support across the school system.

At this time, and over a decade since its introduction, JMB is now proposing an independent review of the two-year PME programme structure. We accept that the system will not revert to a one-year post-graduate model of ITE, but we need to determine the scope for a more fit-for-purpose placement, or ‘apprenticeship’ model in terms of depth, rather than breadth, of in-school experience in the programme’s second year, as well as cost mitigation by remunerating student teachers on placement as in nursing and other professional development programmes.

Finally, our schools operate in an increasingly complex regulatory and policy environment, yet school governance at Board level depends exclusively on volunteerism. Boards of Management are made up of committed volunteers, but who, in many cases, have no professional experience of the education system. A comprehensive programme of training and additional resources is required to support Boards to discharge their responsibilities in a range of areas including financial management, compliance with health and safety regulations, management of school facilities, human resources management including compliance with employment law, compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation and, in particular, their responsibilities as leaders of teaching for learning.



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings
[continued]

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › While current, high-level approaches by the Department of Education will have long-term effects, JMB urges central government to implement immediate alleviation strategies to assist in teacher recruitment and retention for the forthcoming school year
- › In particular, addressing the cost-base of becoming and continuing as a teacher will require the serious and immediate attention of government as it is acting as a barrier to much-needed social diversity across the profession
- › In the interim, the Department and Inspectorate should prepare guidelines for schools on how to make provision for a range of curricular subjects, and Guidance Counselling in light of the current severe teacher supply crisis in these areas
- › A comprehensive programme of training and additional resources is required to support Boards of Management to oversee the provision of high-quality education and to strive to continuously improve the learning experience of students in our schools
- › The scope and scale of curricular change at post-primary will demand an enhancement of each school's senior leadership team to ensure access, participation, and positive outcomes for all

(a) Renewal of 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.

Optimistically however, interim report No. 2 of the University of Limerick's 4-year longitudinal study 'Exploring the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle' points to some positive outcomes despite the many challenges:

- › Teachers believed CBAs supported student engagement, enjoyment, motivation, and skills development
- › 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
- › 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



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings [continued]

- › 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
- › 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 report equally identifies negative-impact findings which will require the attention of both policymakers and practitioners, including:

- › Teachers felt that the pandemic and school closures reduced and hindered their own engagement and understanding of the Framework for Junior Cycle
- › Some teachers also feared that students had extensive gaps in their knowledge because of school closures and that students lacked motivation to study and learn as a result of the State examinations being cancelled
- › Teachers' capacity to find time to engage fully with the changes, to plan, and to develop resources was a core concern
- › Teachers in some schools felt that a lack of resources and supportive digital technology within the school impacted on their capacity to enact the changes
- › Students across the schools reported experiencing significant stress with regard to their everyday workloads and struggled to balance homework, CBAs, and study for tests and exams
- › According to almost all parents, the Covid pandemic had a significant impact on their child's education. It was believed that this impacted on their transition to post-primary school, their levels of motivation, their social development, their mental health and impeded their learning

Thus, a 'back to normal' agenda ignores some key issues facing school communities and the evidence of principal perspectives shared with the JMB points to an immediate and urgent need for professionalised mental health and emotional supports in our schools. The national narrative has always placed the responsibility for mitigating societal challenges at the door of our classrooms. Teachers, including guidance counsellors, are not professional therapists – they are professional educators. As we will argue later in this submission, the inclusion of post primary schools in the piloting of emotional therapeutic services at primary level represents an immediate imperative for our young people and should be actioned by government.



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings
[continued]

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › 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
- › 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 in schools from September 2023
- › ITE programmes should comprehend SPHE education and professional diploma programmes such as currently offered by DCU, should be scaled-up nationally

(b) Renewal of Senior Cycle

JMB is conscious that the NCCA's Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report, published by the Minister over a year ago, represents a significant milestone in the journey towards an eventual Framework for Senior Cycle. We are, however, concerned at the lack of communication on key aspects of its implementation, the delay in identifying network schools, and on establishing consultative structures around all aspects of this vital national enterprise.

Voluntary secondary schools will, of course, be happy to participate in any relevant development work around senior cycle renewal and will have the support of JMB in any such undertakings. We believe that the perspective of voluntary secondary schools is of particular value in this discourse as the faith-centred characteristic spirit of these communities, affirmed in constitution, legislation and regulation, provides a rich tradition rooted in the fully human spirit, mind, and body. Each voluntary secondary school, though part of a cohesive State provision and centred on the common good, nonetheless brings with it a sense of its own autonomy as an educational enterprise. The principle of subsidiarity from which our legislative and moral authority derives allows a certain degree of freedom in terms of contextualisation and affirms our schools' significant rights and responsibilities in terms of the provision of locally relevant, engaging, holistic, pastorally aware, and high-quality student-centred schooling.

In reflecting on a senior cycle reform agenda, our school leaders paid explicit attention to the logistics of change, the professional learning required and the operability or otherwise of implementation demands. Their key considerations included:

- › Clarity and cohesion of policy – not developed 'on the hoof' as occurred with junior cycle
- › Leadership for learning prioritised – liberating the principal and senior leadership team to develop the core function of the school



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings [continued]

- › Fit-for-purpose DP, AP, and administrative support for a contemporary, high-demand and high-functioning educational enterprise
- › PTR progressively reduced to expand the curriculum and reduce overcrowded classes of young adults. This is the key lever for sustainable change at senior cycle, as no number of creative programmes or pathways can continue to be provided on a shoestring
- › An expanded and professionally developed guidance and counselling service must be provided
- › Any emerging professional learning programme must not disrupt and erode the life of our schools – the system must be courageous around deploying school closure for this vital national enterprise
- › Develop multi-disciplinary teams and approaches in support of students with SEN, as most have complex needs which cannot be met by low-cost single-approach methods
- › Junior cycle reform almost completely failed to engage parents – this cannot be allowed to happen for senior cycle, and we should leverage the experience of the network schools once established
- › The physical environment of the school is not aligned with contemporary needs and a programme of adaptation, refurbishment, and additionality will be required to create learning spaces which align with an integrated, holistic, high-wellbeing approach to upper secondary education
- › Voluntary secondary schools spend inordinate amounts of time fundraising. Our schools should be resourced equitably – the current situation is discriminatory
- › Digital technologies will inevitably be embedded in new programmes (as is the case, for example, with LC PE), thus infrastructural and CPD bottlenecks must be removed in advance of any new developments at senior cycle
- › Boards of Management will require extensive supports if they are to be answerable in terms of their statutory leadership for learning role

JMB continues to engage with the Department, the NCCA, and the other stakeholders involved in this important phase of the initiative and will ensure that our members continue to have the school management voice heard while continuing to contribute to the national discourse around the emerging Senior Cycle renewal process.

RECOMMENDATION:

- › The Minister and Department should immediately develop and implement a communications strategy to ensure post-primary schools are updated on developments and included in decision-making



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings
[continued]

(c) Supporting STEM Education

In *Forbairt*, the Department has committed to 'publish and commence delivery of the STEM Education Implementation Plan' this year. The current plan, 2017 to 2026, frames its delivery targets under four pillars:

Pillar 1. Nurture learner engagement and participation

The success of our students in co-curricular initiative such as the BT Young Scientist Exhibition, Young Social Innovators, School Green Flag, Take Action for Climate Change, and EcoUNESCO, are all the more remarkable given the lack of investment in infrastructure, support staffing, and time afforded to our schools.

We have been delivering STEM education on a shoestring level of supports and urgently require the 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
- teacher leadership posts 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.

Section 3.2 of the Department's report '*STEM Education 2020: Reporting on Practice in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Post-Primary Contexts*' forefronts 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.

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.

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.



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings [continued]

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 and, ultimately, workforce contributor to the economy. Such indicators that require to be addressed include:

- › The high cost of qualifying as a secondary school teacher, and the risk of exclusion of particular social groups, impacting on teaching workforce diversity
- › The 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



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings [continued]

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
- To broaden the curriculum to include an adequate range of STEM subjects, schools will require both an advance staffing allocation and specialist facilities where subjects new to their curriculum are being established
- 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. Teacher leadership posts to coordinate STEM teaching and activities, including health and safety compliance

(d) Supporting Literacy and Numeracy

(i) *Enabling parents and communities to support children's literacy and numeracy development*

Parents are the primary educators of their children, and every opportunity should be taken to develop appropriate partnership in this endeavour. Undoubted progress made, for example with the introduction of the HSCL scheme, should be acknowledged and affirmed as it is the envy of schools and systems across the world and should be broadened out to schools beyond the DEIS programme. Individual HSCL teachers working in close liaison with JCSP coordinators have worked wonders with families in such areas as books in the home, parents reading with their children, and challenging the centrality of technology in the lives and bedrooms of teenagers. In this regard, the slow dismantling of the JCSP programme in schools is of serious concern to JMB and should be reversed at policy level as a matter of urgency.



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings [continued]

Schools have a responsibility to families and investment in engaging adults and parents more fully in the school enterprise will pay dividends in terms of community support and literacy outcomes across both the student population and their families.

Schools however are busy places and, HSCL initiatives apart, can only do so much with parents and families. 'It takes a village to rear a child' and community supports should be encouraged by encouraging projects such as continuing to make local libraries attractive to parents, children, and teenagers; business and enterprise sponsorship of reading, writing and creative writing competitions; promotion of volunteerism in respect of librarianship, local history, storytelling, and a host of other strategies such as those already identified and framed by JCSP reading and maths initiatives.

(ii) Improving the curriculum and learning experience

The NCCA

The timely development by NCCA of a new curriculum framework for primary education points to the value of much of the Council's work in terms of the present debate, as does their work on senior cycle restructuring and the independent review of the implementation of the framework for junior cycle.

The general acceptance of, and affirmation for, what was then called Project Maths has been a welcome development, particularly in its focus on problem-solving capabilities in young people. Teachers, however, continue to report a need for a block of time in the first term of 1st year to ensure that *all* students are brought to a functional level of skill in numerical functions, basic algebra, and geometry.

Secondary school mathematics teachers should be listened-to, and their advice incorporated into both the new strategy and curriculum provision at both local and national levels.

Need for libraries and librarians

All schools should have a well-stocked and attractive library, centrally located, and staffed by enthusiastic and skilled promoters of reading and literacy approaches. Though some schools within the DEIS programme have received approval for the appointment of JCSP librarians, security of tenure is absent. In this respect *all* schools have students needing library facilities and gifted children have special needs too. In terms of 'putting our money where our vision is', provision should therefore be made for such staffing and facilities in every secondary school.

Free Textbook Scheme

JMB is urgently seeking the expansion to post-primary of the free-books provision currently being implemented at primary level. Such an approach, particularly in light of the current cost-of-living crisis, would represent perhaps the greatest and most cost-effective investment by the state in the educational experience and outcomes of this generation of young people, as well as supporting their hard-pressed families.



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings [continued]

(iii) Supporting diverse learners to achieve their potential

Three groups of learners, those within the DEIS programme, immigrant students from Ukraine and those for whom English is an additional language, and, though not an educational sub-group, students from the Travelling community, also require specific supports as parental English literacy levels in the latter two categories are frequently below national averages. The original strategy failed to adequately address students with special educational needs. While it is accepted that a regime of supports exists to assist such students, the high levels of retention and mainstreaming of students with profound and enduring SEN within the system represents an increasing challenge to literacy and numeracy outcomes on a whole-school level – precisely the approach demanded under all current policy frameworks and, indeed, legislation. Given the expansion in demand for support provision, particularly in light of possible rights-based resourcing changes following the review of the EPSN Act, JMB would expect that measures to address SEN and Traveller-student literacy and numeracy needs deserve specific treatment as a matter of urgency.

Disadvantage and the DEIS experience

The raft of provisions engaged-with by schools under the DEIS programme have been both efficient and effective in terms of delivery and outcomes. Feedback from the recent Chief Inspector's Report not alone confirms such positive achievements and affirms good practice but helpfully informed future direction in terms of data-informed interventions in literacy and numeracy in particular. Such testing, data-gathering, parent and student consultation, and intra-school communication, all demand additional SEN and DEIS coordination time, currently not separately provided for.

One aspect of the management of schools serving disadvantaged communities, however, is the increased level of planning, evaluation, resource management, administration, and accountability which must be undertaken by the principal and board of management. To date, the Department has never acknowledged the additional demands placed on principals, in particular in DEIS schools, and JMB is concerned that the additional responsibilities inherent in any eventual successor to the current literacy and numeracy strategy will both increase stress and reduce effectiveness among such principals. The provision of a ring-fenced post of responsibility to lead an in-school team with responsibility for DEIS planning and/or literacy and numeracy planning in these designated schools would show a return on such an investment in multiples.

English as an Additional Language (EAL)

The profile model of allocating SET resources has widely been reported as leading to an effective reduction in overall EAL teaching hours for students at post-primary level. JMB views this as a retrograde step since the needs of such students are highly individualised and extend beyond their language capacity into areas such as social integration, homework challenges, parental engagement etc.

Yet again the administrative, resource and accountability demands of testing and tracking systems, engagement with online resources, and the requirements of 'toolkits' for EAL work place yet more pressure on school principals, with further erosion of teacher hours and no additional support for implementation.



Goal 1: Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students in schools and early years settings
[continued]

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- All schools should have a well-stocked and attractive library, centrally located, and staffed by enthusiastic and skilled promoters of reading and literacy approaches
- JMB is urgently seeking the expansion to post-primary of the free-books provision currently being implemented at primary level
- Specific measures and supports to address the language, literacy and numeracy needs of students from the Traveller and Ukrainian communities are urgently required
- The slow dismantling of the JCSP programme in schools is of serious concern to JMB and should be reversed at policy level as a matter of urgency



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

1. Guidance & Counselling Services

From the Statement of Strategy:

We will support the mental health and wellbeing of students through implementation of the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* and ensuring that wellbeing supports recognise the impact of Covid-19 on students. We will also develop a strategy to enhance learning opportunities for exceptionally able students.

(a) Post Primary School Mental Health and Guidance Counselling Provision

It is important at this time to point out that there exist high levels of damage to mental health in our society not alone due to the enduring effects of the pandemic lockdowns and school closures, but also the impact of technologies on young people in particular, the relentless pace of change, the demise of community supports, the gulf between rich and poor etc. Recent 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.

We need coherence in education policymaking and not just another instrumental and accountability-driven approach to reform. In particular, an independent review of the mismatch between guidance counselling allocations and the psycho-social needs of students must be instituted as a matter of priority.

The JMB is clear about the challenges facing our schools in terms of their provision for guidance counselling and are reinforced by the Chief Inspector's Report (2022), which makes repeated reference to the need for system-level supports to enhance provision for guidance and counselling in our schools:

- The additional Guidance and Counselling resources provided in response to the Covid-19 pandemic are a welcome additional support for students; however, further system supports in Guidance and Counselling will be required
- Continued enhancement of system supports will be required in the area of Guidance and Counselling to address challenges related to recruitment, curriculum and increasing levels of anxiety among students



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

Such calls for enhancement of the service pre-date both the announcements regarding senior cycle and the arrival of students from Ukraine. As these emerging demands collide with the already inadequate allocation of hours for guidance counselling, not yet fully restored from before the financial crash cuts of over a decade ago, the capacity of schools to cope will be unsustainable and cases relating to young people in crisis will spill over into already overwhelmed child and adolescent mental health services.

At this point, JMB is now seeking a meaningful increase in provision for guidance and counselling in the face of a generation of students with unprecedented needs in terms of trauma recovery, metacognitive skills loss, career plan damage and a raft of other crises attributable in part to the pandemic, as well as the new 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.

What has emerged in the tentative restoration approaches undertaken thus far is a re-modelling of provision which does not restrict the allocation of the full quantum of guidance hours to a single person. Management bodies have supported this flexibility and, by and large, its evolution has been effective in creating a school-wide appreciation of, and a broadening of provision for, these core activities.

In seeking an increase in provision, JMB is cognisant of the difficulties of recruiting fully qualified and experienced guidance and counselling personnel. Indeed, the phasing of any allocation restoration must be in tandem with an increase in the qualification rates of new guidance counsellors. The model of in-school deployment currently in place, however, facilitates a realignment of role and responsibility on a school-wide basis to ensure each student receives the restorative care, whether personal, psychological, pedagogical, or career-related, they deserve. However, we cannot carry out this critical task on behalf of society without adequate resourcing. The money spent on such an early, school-level intervention, particularly in the area of school attendance, will pay itself back to the exchequer in many multiples over the next five to ten years when it will become the responsibility of our clinics, hospitals, social workers, psychiatric services, employers and, indeed, prisons who will have to bear the burden.

(b) Coordination of Services and establishment of Links between HSE Services and the Education System

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.



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

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.

(c) Teacher Training and Development in Positive Mental Health and Anti-Bullying

In terms of teacher training and development, it goes without saying that school communities would welcome opportunities for school-wide awareness-raising and professional learning interventions that are relevant to this agenda and are professionally designed and delivered.

We must first, however, address the factors that our principals have identified as hindering the implementation of effective positive mental health and anti-bullying strategies in our schools:

- The majority of principals cite lack of time as the greatest restraint
- Lack of substitution provision for the necessary in-school group meetings involved, teacher CPD, and particularly in relation to teachers investigating incidents of bullying
- Limitations on the senior leadership team, particularly at deputy principal level
- Lack of coordination time
- Department approval for in-school, all-staff, in-service

Thus, a Department-supported approach to re-energising schools' anti-bullying and positive mental health programmes would be welcomed and most timely.

(d) Guidance Teacher Supply

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, as is currently being provided by DCU in Kilkenny.



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

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
- An independent review of the mismatch between guidance counselling allocations and the psycho-social needs of contemporary students must be instituted as a matter of priority
- 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
- 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
- JMB urges the Department to support the training of new guidance counsellors, particularly in light of (a) the cost to individual teachers and (b) substituted release for training, supervision, and work-shadowing
- In implementing their anti-bullying policies as set out in the Department's 2013 procedures, schools' most pressing needs centre on time and expertise. School management requires the substitution 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



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

2. Special and Additional Educational Needs

From the Statement of Strategy:

We will support the participation and progression of students with special educational needs through the delivery of integrated resources, in particular by advancing towards the roll-out of the School Inclusion Model and a new Special Needs Assistants (SNA) allocation model.

We will also increase the development of special class places for students with additional needs in new and existing mainstream schools, as well as continued support for the development of special schools as a vital part of our education system through effective forecasting of future need and equipping schools to better support students with special educational needs.

The purpose of the present review of the EPSEN Act is to provide assurance that there is an adequate legislative basis for the educational provision, both current and planned, for children with special and additional educational needs in order to protect the interests of the children concerned and their families and those of the State; to reflect best practice in contemporary education in this field, and to take stock of policy developments since the Act was signed into law, almost nineteen years ago.

Given that many sections of the EPSEN Act have yet to be commenced, substantial policy change has emerged since 2004 in special education; there has been much larger investment in special education by the state, and issues relating to school placements have led to changes around the Education and Admissions Acts. Given these developments, the present review is very timely and is welcomed by JMB, which is represented and engaged at all levels in the review process.

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 underpinning 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.



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

(a) Essential Supports and Enabling Measures for Schools

‘The overall policy objective of the Department of Education is to promote inclusive education for children and young people with SEN in mainstream settings. Where this is not possible, the policy commitment is to provide for specialised settings through special-class or special-school placements⁴’.

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.

While it is impossible to begin such a discourse without seeing what emerges, the following key elements of current special educational needs provision require urgent attention, even without changing the law.

(b) Special Educational Needs Team Coordination

As a matter of urgency, government must make distinct provision for SEN team coordination. JMB has repeatedly asserted the need for dedicated special needs coordination, planning, tracking, consultation, communication, and reporting in every school, and this position is supported by the NCSE. Principals’ feedback has emphatically asserted the following points:

1. There is absolute unanimity that every school must have dedicated SEN coordination capacity at leadership level
2. Continuing to find coordination time from within the resource-hours allocation to students is widely seen as unethical and inefficient
3. There is no clarity or advice on the proportion of school profile SET hours which should be dedicated for coordination and communication activities
4. Those in lead coordination positions continually express their sense of being overwhelmed by the demands of the role and the limits of their authority
5. Principals report being unable to keep an additional educational needs coordinator in the role for any extended length of time, due to the role expansion, administrative overload and lack of time
6. Post primary schools are given no time for duties in their posts of responsibility, other than for Programme Coordination or for Adult Education

4 Chief Inspector’s Report September 2016 – December 2020 <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/232560/fac408b3-689b-44cb-a8f1-3cb090018a05.pdf#page=null>



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

7. Principals agree that effective leadership for curriculum access for all requires systems-level knowledge, authority, and agency at school level

That final point represents an opportunity to widen the conversation around SEN team coordination to a broader discussion around leadership for learning, curriculum access for all, and the systems knowledge required to give effect to national policy within the lifeworld and systemworld 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.

(c) Special Needs Assistants

The first phase of a new full-service support model based on the NCSE policy advice of 2017, *'Delivering for Students with Additional Care Needs: The Right Support at the Right Time in Schools'*, was postponed in 2020. As the then proposal was to implement solely the profile model of SNA allocation to schools without proper trialling, the JMB welcomed the pause. The capacity of school management to both identify additional, often complex, care needs and make resource allocation decisions has never been fully resourced or supported in terms of training and external advice, and leaves principals exposed to immediate and *post hoc* legal challenges relating to their deployment decisions and their consequences. Indeed, schools with significant SNA allocations will need a dedicated person to manage this resource. The administration alone virtually constitutes a senior leadership and management role in itself, and the current proposals presume that the principal will undertake everything from recruitment to identification and re-identification of ever-changing care-need, to deployment, to HR and IR operations, to training and CPD, to conflict resolution, to professional accountability etc. etc. Currently, 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.

It is the position of JMB that, as a profile-based model of SNA allocation is now being considered, the professional development needs of school leaders, SENCOs, SETs, and SNAs must be met. Sufficient coordination and administration capacity must be provided to operate the model effectively. The industrial relations parameters relating to current SNA terms and conditions must be fully resolved, and the voice of families must be heard and comprehended, particularly in relation to the devaluing of clinical judgements and their consequences.

(d) Making provision for students with autism

The CI Report places particular emphasis on the task of making provision for students with autism, stating that 'a number of important aspects that relate to provision for children with autism require attention including enrolment practices, review of placements and the integration of learners attending special classes into mainstream provision'. JMB welcomes the



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

highlighting of system and school-level challenges in ASD and other special class provision. We recommended, without success, the integration of the special education support service into Oide, the forthcoming teacher education support service, and also the establishment of an ASD-specific advisory unit, resourced with appropriately qualified and experienced personnel, and who will visit schools to support the journey in these high-demand areas of provision, from forming, to norming, to performing.

High level policy, however worthy and shared, demands accessible and professionalised school-level advice and guidance in realising the Department's position that 'classes for pupils/students with autism and other special classes should prioritise places for those with complex needs, and pupils/students with less complex needs should be included in mainstream classes with appropriate support⁵'.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- › The landscape of SEN provision was radically worsened by the Covid pandemic and schools must now face the challenges of supporting students from Ukraine. JMB urges that the adequacy of the SET and EAL allocation to schools be reviewed in light of these challenges and that adequate provision be made to ensure the levels of provision such vulnerable students deserve
- › 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 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

5 Chief Inspector's Report September 2016 – December 2020 <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/232560/fac408b3-689b-44cb-a8f1-3cb090018a05.pdf#page=null>



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

3. Expansion to Post Primary of the Pilot Scheme for Student Emotional Therapeutic Supports

There is no 'silver bullet' which will resolve the challenges of addressing student mental health in schools. These challenges are both perennial and multi-faceted and will always demand constant vigilance as well as operational approaches providing supports from every possible aspect. For schools, the investment in developing students' emotional competencies and resilience will bring returns on multiple levels in terms of student outcomes, attendance, retention and progression as well as making for a happier, less fraught workplace for the adults of the school community.

The State has responsibilities to school communities and their students' families far beyond the delivery of the curriculum. The JMB is, of course, prepared to support the provision of a renewed, coherent, and grounded range of supports to our schools in supporting student wellbeing and positive mental health. This is an all-fronts issue. We need:

- › dedicated deputy principal capacity to provide for the administrative responsibilities of each school
- › our year heads to have time for duties ring-fenced and allocated-for
- › our guidance and counselling provision fully restored immediately
- › teacher time to generate and develop evidence-informed decisions around Wellbeing
- › our parents to become more actively involved in our schools and not be forced to spend their school-contact time in fundraising to replace the shortfall in state funding of the post-primary sector
- › exemplification of best practice in other schools and jurisdictions
- › external supports in terms of facilitation and ongoing advice
- › leadership development in the areas of cyber-bullying, homophobic and transphobic bullying, and school-wide positive mental health approaches that work

While the new Cineáltas anti-bullying framework is a good place to begin, we absolutely need our school leaders freed-up to lead learning in their schools and to create a climate of positive mental health for all.



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

Expansion of the Pilot Programme

If we accept and affirm the underlying distress in schools due to the current anxiety-matrix afflicting our teachers, students, and families, we must begin to recognise the need for national healing and authentic holism, and to understand that restricted analyses of complex issues such as LGBTIQ+ mental health challenges, cyber-bullying, (or for that matter literacy, numeracy, intercultural inclusion, mainstreaming special needs provision, tackling disadvantage etc. etc.) will offer only short-term strategies and approaches which are attractive but will only take us so far.

In addressing such challenges, the JMB urges the Minister to expand into post-primary the proposed piloting of a scheme to deploy emotional counselling/therapeutic supports in primary schools to address trauma, anxiety, and mental health difficulties of vulnerable children.

The case for such an expansion is clear. 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

Such a set of very real challenges requires a heightened awareness from policymakers around a key strategic gap in supports in Irish schools that places Ireland out of step with many European countries which see emotional counsellors/therapists in and around every school. The recent evaluation for the EU Commission of the 2011 Council Recommendation on Early School Leaving highlighted that emotional counselling supports in and around schools are widespread in many EU countries.



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

There needs to be emotional counselling and therapeutic supports available in all DEIS schools as a first step, and then beyond, as a key support for the mental health strain and trauma experienced by so many of our children. Ireland is radically out of step with many European countries who provide these services in schools. This is not addressed by NEPS or career guidance allocation increases, as neither provide or are suitable to provide ongoing individual therapeutic supports for trauma and complex emotional needs.

The National Wellbeing in Schools Policy 2018 of a teacher as 'One good adult' is no substitute for qualified emotional counsellors and/or therapists. The complexity of emotional need in students requires supports that an individual teacher is not in a position to provide. These emotional counselling supports can build on the Programme for Government's 2020 commitment to 'Improve access to supports for positive mental health in schools'.

The JMB is committed to working closely with the Department of Education and other government departments, as well as with our schools, to ensure the healthiest possible experience and outcome for every student coming to our schools at this challenging time for young people. We commend the Minister on the introduction of the pilot programme at primary level and look forward to the positive developments that will emerge from its expansion into our secondary schools.

RECOMMENDATION:

- The JMB urges the Minister to expand into post-primary the proposed 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



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

4. Voluntary Secondary Schools in the DEIS Programme

From the Statement of Strategy:

We will address the retention and achievement gap between Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and non-DEIS schools through the DEIS programme.

The lengths to which DEIS school leaders and their communities went to maintain student engagement and inclusivity during the pandemic emergency may perhaps never be known. DEIS principals, most without a second deputy and some with just fractions, had to implement every single element of distance teaching and learning provision, school administration, junior cycle reporting, calculated/accredited grades administration and all that every other school leader had to perform, but also to:

- › Completely redesign, administer and arrange for the provision of school meals for hundreds of families across their communities
- › Operate remote pedagogy across a school population with little or no appropriate digital infrastructure
- › Find ways to support their students with special educational needs – typically well over 50% of their enrolment
- › Mitigate the worst effects of lockdown on young people at risk of neglect and/or abuse
- › Try to re-establish contact with students who completely disengaged from all school provision
- › Provide for book rental scheme operations during a lockdown
- › Plan for a Summer Programme to re-engage such ‘lost’ students in advance of re-opening, and this after the school had closed and there was no staff support available

Of all the stress-points JMB experienced during the school closures, it was across our then fifty DEIS-school principals and their deputies that the most worrying levels of anxiety and distress were evidenced. It is finally time for this inhuman imposition of un-resourced responsibility to change.

The impact of policy and initiative overload on schools within the DEIS programme is but one factor. What is far more concerning is the effect of higher levels of student behavioural challenges due to emotional, social, and cognitive-capacity issues which erode the time and energies of the DEIS school leader, particularly in our underfunded and understaffed voluntary secondary schools.



Goal 2: Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

[continued]

As an immediate action, JMB is calling on the Department to allocate a full deputy principal in DEIS schools of up to 400 students. JMB urges the Minister to implement this equity measure for the forthcoming academic year and to broaden its scope to include all schools with fractions of deputy principal positions thereafter.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- DEIS school principals worked tirelessly during the pandemic and they must, as a matter of urgency, be provided with acceptable levels of senior leadership support to allow them and their school communities to survive the extreme challenges in the wake of this crisis
- We seek, as an immediate action, the allocation of a full deputy principal in all schools of up to 400 students and the allocation of a second deputy principal to schools within the DEIS Programme with enrolments of between 400 and 599 students
- The Department's reconfiguration of the DEIS scheme must go further to provide for a more equitable framework for addressing disadvantage. The all-or-nothing approach to DEIS inclusion must be reviewed to provide schools with high numbers of students experiencing disadvantage with targeted supports



Goal 3: Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector

1. Eliminating the Need for Voluntary Contributions

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

‘It is clear that voluntary secondary schools receive a significantly lower proportion of funding from the state and, as a result, are more reliant on voluntary contributions from parents and on general fund-raising. This reliance on discretionary funding is seen to pose challenges given lower levels of resources among some families, especially those with children attending DEIS schools, and means that funding sources are vulnerable to future changes in family income. Sectoral differences are also evident in the expenditure of schools, with voluntary secondary schools more likely to be required to cover from the capitation grant items paid centrally in case of the other sectors and, in addition, need to engage in substantial fund-raising and request voluntary contributions from parents to fund the basic day-to-day running of the school.’⁶

The Minister and government must understand that voluntary secondary school communities are suffering due to long-standing, systemic underfunding and that the capacity of families to replace the monies denied by the state to this post-primary sector alone has now all but gone. As energy costs for families increase and general cost-of-living inflation spirals, it is becoming increasingly difficult on every level, including moral, for schools to seek voluntary subscriptions from hard-pressed families to make up a deficit unnecessarily created by government in its unequal funding of schools by sector.

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

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

⁶ ‘Governance and Funding of Voluntary Secondary Schools in Ireland’. (2013) Merike Darmody and Emer Smyth. ESRI



Goal 3: Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector [continued]

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 conceded by government
- JMB urges the immediate consumer price index-linking of all capitation grants to ensure that schools have sufficient cashflow and financial resources to operate successfully
- A government-level commitment must be made to eliminating, over a three-year period, the need for schools to seek voluntary contributions from families



Goal 3: Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector
[continued]

2. Supporting Digital Literacy

At the heart of the educative enterprise lies the quality of engaged learning that takes place within the classroom – everything else is tangential. We have been focused for too long on hardware, software, networks etc. Teachers will always maintain a focus on pedagogy. Our investment should concentrate there, with the technologies trustworthy and well-maintained. The Minister and Department must future-proof technological investment in schools and not leave students' life-chances to the lottery of their school's or their family's financial capacity.

In terms of school capacity, the following barriers to successful integration of technologies into our schools have long been identified:

1. Investment: The legacy of historic underinvestment has led to continued significant inequity in the digital capacity of different schools. In particular, system-level bottlenecks emerged during the school closures that require to be seen by government as national priorities and not drawing on the dedicated funding assigned as annual grants to schools.

In this context, JMB is anxious that the delayed release of the 2023 ICT Grant to schools is not repeated in subsequent years.

The three infrastructure priorities are:

- a) Immediate roll-out of 200mb broadband to every school
- b) All connections to be via fibre, and removal of inadequate and unreliable satellite or other wave-based services
- c) Once and for all elimination of socially inequitable digital poverty – an appropriate device for every child as a national project

2. Policy overload: This unaddressed trend has imposed multiple disconnected accountabilities on schools. It is time to call a halt to externally imposed change as both principals and teachers are becoming lost in the plethora of policymakers' imperatives and don't know which to carry-out, by when, for whom, by whom and to what end. Before the pandemic, the school system was exposed to a psychologically damaging one hundred circulars per year. Since the closures of March 2020, this policy tsunami increased exponentially and the catch-up wave of new Departmental strategies and policies must not introduce yet another set of demands on a school system that needs some years to recover, reset and, indeed, psychologically heal.

Systemsworld aside, students also need time and stability to regain their proficiency as active learners, self-directed, self-motivating, and self-organising. Such fundamental skills suffered attrition during the pandemic and have yet to be re-established across our student population. In this regard, allowing schools time and space to restore such capacities will demand a policy pause for school communities not currently evident.



Goal 3: Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector [continued]

3. Coherence: Technologies are tools – it is the calibre of the human engagement with the tools that determines the outcome. Michael Fullan states that ‘effective principals attack incoherence’ and thus for digital technologies to become further embedded as the government intends,

- a) a clear rationale for adopting them must be formulated and articulated,
- b) barriers to their adoption must be removed, and
- c) a magnetic draw in the form of a methodological ‘better way’ must exist to generate motivation

Teachers’ innate resistance to externally mandated ‘innovation’ stems from a protective disposition to shielding their students from the vagaries of often politically driven policy changes. Digital innovation however is different. People enjoy engaging with it as we are all visual learners. One respondent to our recent consultation said, ‘If teachers had an opportunity to engage in real e-learning, they would eat it up’.

Economising too strictly on hardware, cloud-based solutions, technological support, and professional development will restrict the potential ICT can offer schools to pockets of activity characterised by social inequity and limited impact. Now is the time to make a coherent argument for universal engagement with ICT in the classroom and for exploiting the adaptive learning software that already exists.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- To underpin the three pillars of the new Digital Strategy for Schools, adequate 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 is anxious that the delayed release of the 2023 ICT Grant to schools is not repeated in subsequent years
- 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



Goal 3: Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector
[continued]

3. Buildings and Infrastructure

Many voluntary secondary schools have been serving their communities for more than 100 years. Many were built or extended-to with no, or limited, State assistance and are 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.

In previous Programmes for Government, the elimination of traditional prefabricated classrooms has been specifically identified as a national priority, but progress remains very slow.

JMB has welcomed in the past the commitment to deliver a programme to build and modernise P.E. 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



Goal 3: Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector
[continued]

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 or those projects need to be transferred to the major capital programme for attention. JMB welcomes that this approach has been taken in a number of instances over the past year, but a greater number of schools require this whole-school approach.
- Funding for the Schools Energy Retrofit Pathfinder Programme be increased substantially so that a far greater number of schools can benefit from the programme on an annual basis.
- The promised new Summer Works Scheme, with its increased focus on climate targets and the installation of solar panels be made available to all schools at the earliest possible date while a new scheme should also provide for the 'traditional' categories.
- The Minor Works Grant for secondary schools which was introduced as a Covid measure, should be re-introduced, and continued on an annual basis.
- The promised PE Hall building 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 all schools be continued but that efforts be made to shorten the period from approval to construction in the cases of a permanent building.
- Funding be provided for the Prefab Replacement Scheme
- 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.



Goal 3: Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector
[continued]

4. Adult & Further Education

JMB and ACCS FE-providing schools have been working closely together to establish sound working relationships with DE, FESS, SOLAS and QQI and, in a major step forward, JMB and ACCS have set up a Further Education Support Unit to carry out the following functions:

- › Establish arrangements with FE-providing schools both nationally and regionally to work effectively with ETB and SOLAS structures
- › Coordinate and support schools in relation to planning and re-focusing provision in consultation with SOLAS in response to the recommendations from the PLC evaluation.
- › Coordinate the provision of relevant CPD
- › Provide a communication channel facilitating the exchange of information between our schools, ETBs, ETBI, SOLAS, QQI and other relevant stakeholders
- › Support JMB and ACCS FE-providing schools with the process of QQI Quality Assurance, QQI re-engagement and QQI programme validation
- › Contribute to the establishment of formal arrangements through ETB FET services to facilitate collaboration between ETB FET services and JMB/ACCS schools
- › Collaborate to develop and share FET mechanisms to support and encourage cohesive, integrated local planning and delivery

RECOMMENDATION:

- › As the landscape of national employment levels and PLC uptake change, JMB, along with our ACCS colleagues, is anxious that the staffing of further and adult education provision is placed on a sounder policy-level footing than currently, and that any changed funding arrangements be fully consulted upon in advance of implementation.

Concluding Commentary

On behalf of the Joint Managerial Body, we would like to express our sincere appreciation to our member schools and the various officers and sections within the Department of Education for the authentic partnership each has demonstrated. Our collaborative efforts and open lines of communication have been instrumental in fostering a positive working relationship, and the constructive dialogue between our organisation, our member schools and the Department has proven invaluable to meet our shared goal of supporting the provision of a high-quality education and learning experience to meet the needs of all our students.

The JMB is committed to representing and advocating for the interests of our voluntary secondary schools, and we are grateful for the trust they have placed in us. This submission is 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, and to address the challenges faced by schools, their leaders, and Boards of Management. It also sets out to bridge the gap in empathic understanding between the worlds of policy and practice.

The JMB contends 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:

- provide, as outlined throughout this submission, practical support for a generation of students whose experience of life and education has been hugely impacted by the pandemic. In addition to other supports, JMB is advocating for the provision of appropriate guidance counselling to all schools, including fee-charging schools, and access to emotional counselling and therapeutic supports to address trauma, anxiety and mental health difficulties of students, particularly in schools within the DEIS programme.
- provide for the sustainability of school leadership and management by providing additional resourcing to senior leadership teams to carry out their administrative roles in addition to their roles as leaders of learning. This additional resourcing of senior leadership teams in post-primary schools is essential to augment senior leadership capacity, the leadership of curriculum access for all students, and to provide for the systems knowledge required to give effect to the national policy of mainstreaming virtually all students, including those with profound and enduring special education needs. This augmentation of senior leadership capacity would better provide for the Department's prioritisation of leadership for learning within a rapidly changing junior and senior cycle curricular landscape. The JMB contends that the systems-level knowledge, authority, and agency at school level required to lead curriculum access for all and senior cycle redevelopment can best be mediated by an additional deputy principal rather than a dispersed allocation of SENCO hours, undefined posts of responsibility, or curriculum reform coordination hours.

Concluding Commentary

[continued]

- › resource a comprehensive training programme and provide additional supports to Boards of Management in carrying out their responsibilities as leaders and managers in our schools.
- › implement alleviation strategies to assist teacher recruitment and retention strategies including reviewing the structure of the PME to determine the scope for a more fit-for-purpose placement, or ‘apprenticeship’ model in terms of depth, rather than breadth, of in-school experience in the programme’s second year, as well as cost mitigation by remunerating student teachers on placement as in nursing and other professional development programmes
- › 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. We urge that methods of delivery be put in place so that all infrastructural projects be progressed through the Department’s construction phases in an efficient and speedy manner.

In conclusion, the JMB remains steadfast in our commitment to advocating for our member schools and their students. We want to emphasise our readiness to provide further insights into any specific recommendations outlined in this document. Our commitment to collaboration extends beyond this submission, and we will continue to work collaboratively with all the education partners to address emerging challenges, adapt to changing educational landscapes and provide a nurturing and inclusive environment for all members of our school communities.

Mrs Deirdre Matthews,
JMB General Secretary
June 2023



JMB Joint Managerial Body
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