

“Investment in Primary Education”
- a pre-Budget Submission from
the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation

October 2008

Introduction

Global and national analysis shows clearly that investment in education pays dividends in terms of economic development and in the creation of a fair and just society. In Ireland, it is widely recognised that educational standards have made a significant contribution to recent economic development. Equally, the education system has contributed to reducing inequality and combating poverty by increasing equality of opportunity.

Most recently, the *Education at a Glance 2008* Report (OECD) states “Ireland and Spain perform substantially better in terms of providing higher education for all, irrespective of the students’ background”. The same report includes Ireland among countries that seem well positioned to benefit from the employment-attainment effect of higher educational attainment. It states that Ireland is one of the countries “where employment levels for those with tertiary education are particularly favourable.”

What makes these achievements even more remarkable is that they have been achieved despite the fact that Ireland spends significantly less than other comparable countries. Although spending on education at all levels has increased over the past decade currently, Ireland spends significantly less on education compared to previous years.

In overall terms Ireland ranks 30 out of the 34 countries studied in the *Education at a Glance* Report 2008 in terms of education expenditure as a percentage of GDP.

Yet, Irish education compares favourably with other similar systems. Literacy rates among 15 year olds are among the best in the world while comparisons in Mathematics and Science show Irish pupils on a par with or above their peers in other countries.

Such comparisons show that investment in education is well spent. It is clear that Irish tax payers are receiving a premium return on investment made in the education system.

However, current achievement is no guarantee of future success and the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation makes this submission with a view to the identification of key areas of education where further investment is required.

As in other countries, primary education is the foundation stone of the education system. Ireland has been and continues to be well served by the primary education system but, taking account of global trends, simply maintaining current policies, practices and investment levels in primary education is not an option. Failure to increase educational investment at primary level will see Ireland overtaken in economic and social terms by other countries.

This submission seeks support for the requisite resources and staffing levels to enable primary schools to be innovative, creative places of learning embracing new

methodologies and technologies. Such investment will ensure that primary education will be the platform for personal, social and economic prosperity and development for all in the 21st century.

For it is in primary schools that the future, for better or for worse, is made. Attitudes to life-long learning are fostered in the early years when primary school children learn how to learn, co-operate and develop imagination. Key skills like literacy and numeracy skills are developed at this time as are concepts of self esteem and self-worth.

In changing economic circumstances there is no better way to secure long term prosperity than through investment in education. It is also essential to ensure that all citizens receive a just share of state resources thus contributing to the development of a fair and equitable society.

John Carr, MA (Ed.)
General Secretary

Declan Kelleher
President

The INTO argues that the following measures are **essential** to maintain progress made to date in key areas of the primary education sector and to ensure needed development.

1 Funding of Primary Schools

The Programme for Government commits to increasing the day-to-day funding for primary schools in real terms. Specifically the Programme commits to a doubling of the capitation grant for primary schools within the lifetime of the government. In terms of funding, Irish primary schools are the least well funded sector and as such face a significantly greater challenge than other sectors in dealing with increased running costs. In particular energy costs, waste disposal charges, water charges along with cleaning and hygiene costs have increased dramatically. The ability of schools to meet these increased costs is now seriously in doubt.

A small scale survey of schools in the greater Dublin area shows that parents now contribute more to general school running costs than the state. The survey shows that parents contribute on average €175 per annum in the form of additional funding provided to schools, which is marginally greater than the annual capitation grant paid to schools to meet running costs. Forms of local funding such as voluntary contributions and fundraising activities increase inequity between schools. Such funding allows schools with access to local fundraising to provide increased resources to support curriculum implementation and enhance the curriculum for their pupils.

The findings of this survey support the provision in the Programme for Government to double capitation to primary schools. In recognition of the funding crisis facing schools the INTO seeks a forty percent increase in the capitation grant payable to primary schools in the form of an additional €70.00 per pupil. This will cost in the region of an additional €34 million in a full year.

In recognition of the significant funding pressures faced by new schools in their first years of establishment the INTO seeks significant additional funding for these schools at the time of their establishment. At present schools get €6348.69 as a once off start up grant, which is the equivalent of IR£5,000. This sum has been in place for several years and has never been revised upwards to take account of inflation and does not reflect the increased costs associated with the start up of a modern school in terms of advertising and filling positions and the purchase of a range of items including classroom and school equipment, cleaning materials and office equipment.

The INTO proposes that an additional €50,000 be provided to these schools in their first year and an additional €25,000 be provided in the second year. This proposal would cost in the region of €1.5m per annum in a full year depending on the number of new schools opening.

In addition, these schools should be provided with the full Capitation Grant and the Ancillary Staffing Grant in the first year and subsequent years. Currently new schools have to operate for an 18 month period while receiving funding in these areas equivalent to the annual grant.

2 Caretakers and Secretaries

The Programme for Government states that grants to schools for the employment of support staff such as secretaries and caretakers will be increased significantly. Mindful of the essential contribution that these services make to the effective delivery of primary education the INTO seeks additional funding to meet additional employment costs.

Current levels of grant payments mean that schools are providing additional funding to subsidise state grants or are unable to employ secretaries or caretakers to a level consistent with service levels required.

Mindful of particular financial pressures on small schools the INTO seeks that the minimum per capita grant for the provision of Caretaker and Secretarial services to primary schools, be based on an enrolment of 150 pupils and that grants for schools of more than 150 pupils be based on the actual enrolment in the school with no upper threshold.

A school secretary should be appointed to any new school for a two year fixed term period paid by the DES, after which the school would be included in the ancillary staffing scheme for primary schools.

A school caretaker should be appointed to any new school for a two year fixed term period paid by the DES, after which the school would be included in the ancillary staffing scheme for primary schools.

3 School Staffing

The Programme for Government commits to reducing class sizes. Specifically, it states that the staffing schedule will be reduced from a general rule of at least one teacher for every 27 pupils in 2007/08, by one point a year, to one for every 24 children by 2010/11.

Despite year on year promises to tackle the issue of overcrowded classes, almost one hundred thousand children remain in classes of thirty pupils or more. Irish primary school classes are the second most over-crowded in the EU and teachers are struggling to implement the curriculum.

Classes of twenty or less are internationally accepted as best practice. The INTO seeks the implementation of the Programme for Government with a reduction in the primary school staffing schedule of one pupil per teacher in the school for the school year 2009 – 2010.

The INTO also seeks an immediate end to the current system of unregulated provision for substitute cover for teacher absences. Provision must be made to ensure that teacher absences are covered by fully qualified teachers. This includes the provision of cover for teaching Principals' release time.

In addition, the INTO argues that a forum on teacher supply be convened immediately to ensure that teacher supply is consistent with demographic trends. Recent years have seen a mismatch between teacher supply and pupil numbers with at various times an excess of trained teachers over jobs available while at other times, large numbers of classes were taught by persons with no qualifications.

Consequently, the INTO seeks the establishment of a review body on staffing matters in primary schools. The terms of reference of such a review body shall be to examine and make recommendations to the Minister for Education and Science on current and projected staffing issues in the primary sector up to the year 2013 including:

- current mechanisms of allocating teaching staff to schools and alternative approaches to staff allocation;
- the supply and demand position for primary teachers including the need to ensure that all pupils are taught by appropriately qualified personnel, places in courses of teacher education, arrangements for qualified substitute cover and release time for principal teachers.

In this context the review body should examine school size, administration and accommodation needs and should report to the Minister for Education and Science by the end of May 2009.

4 Special Education

The INTO acknowledges significant additional investment in special education over the lifetime of the last government. Nevertheless the INTO argues that additional resources are required, particularly in the context of the planned roll out of the Education for Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act.

Specifically, the INTO calls for grants in respect of children with special needs in mainstream classes to be paid at the same level as those paid in respect of pupils in special schools and special classes and increased annually in line with inflation.

In addition the union calls for the development of a National Speech and Language Therapy service for pupils in primary schools and the expansion of the National Educational Psychological Service to the numerical strength anticipated at the time of its establishment.

As a priority measure the INTO seeks a national system of state-funded early education for children with intellectual disabilities as promised in the last Programme for Government.

In order to support the continued inclusion of children with special needs in the primary system additional investment must be provided for the professional development of all teachers involved in the teaching of special needs children in an integrated setting.

5. Educational Disadvantage

The INTO recognises that the introduction of the DEIS programme has significant potential to improve educational experiences for children at risk of educational disadvantage and, in order to enhance its effectiveness, calls for reductions in class sizes in all designated disadvantaged schools to a maximum class size of 15 in infants/multi-grade classes and a maximum of 20 pupils in other grades within a three year period.

Many of the factors influencing the educational attainment of disadvantaged pupils lie outside the formal school system. As a consequence, the INTO seeks the introduction of a number of measures including the expansion of breakfast clubs and homework clubs along with increased provision for lunches for children attending schools designated as DEIS Band One Schools. Provision should be made for the extension and integrated delivery of social and medical services to pupils in schools designated disadvantaged.

Irish research shows that quality early childhood education is a key determinant on educational success. The INTO seeks the extension of the *Early Start Programme* to all schools designated disadvantaged to ensure that commitments in the Programme for Government in respect of early childhood education for children attending these schools are met.

In view of increasing numbers seeking unemployment assistance the INTO demands a doubling of funding made available for the school books for necessitous pupils scheme.

6 Early Childhood Education

The OECD report *Education at a Glance 2008* showed Irish spending on pre-school education to be one of the lowest in developed countries. Quality early childhood education provides the basis for lifelong learning. It is also a critical factor in tackling educational disadvantage and upholding children's rights.

The INTO seeks the immediate reversal of the decision to close the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). The work of the Centre was laying the foundation stone for improving Ireland's record in pre-school provision.

The INTO is gravely concerned that insufficient emphasis is currently placed on the importance of early childhood education and therefore calls for the provision of a comprehensive nationwide early education structure under the Department of Education and Science and the expansion of existing state funded early education places, initially in areas of educational disadvantage.

Early childhood education comprises children aged 0 to 6 years and, as a result, the INTO seeks a maximum class size of 20:1 in all single stream infant classes and a maximum class size of 15:1 in all multi-grade infant classes and infant classes in designated areas of disadvantage.

7 School Buildings

The current downturn in the domestic building sector provides a unique opportunity to address the historic under-funding of school buildings in a way that will provide real value for money. The INTO seeks the immediate re-commencement of the school building and refurbishment programme to ensure that all schools with substandard accommodation are upgraded immediately so that all schools can implement the primary school curriculum.

The union seeks the immediate re-instatement of the Summer Works Scheme in Primary Schools with additional funding provided in the coming financial year to enable projects suspended last year to be undertaken along with priority projects for next year.

To maintain investment to date and to avoid increased expenditure in future years the INTO seeks an increase in line with inflation, in the grant for Minor Works.

8 In-Career Development

It is recognised that ongoing professional development is vital for life long high quality performance. Employers have a duty to ensure that employees are provided with the necessary training to undertake new tasks and meet new challenges. Therefore the INTO seeks the provision of funding for ongoing in-service training and delivery into the future.

9 Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service

The INTO demands that the pensions of retired teachers be protected and that the principle of parity of pensions to salary or its equivalent be maintained.

10 Information and Communication Technology in Schools

The INTO seeks the immediate disbursement to schools of the €252 million fund for Schools ICT promised in the National Development Plan in line with the report *Investing Effectively*.

Such funding must cover the purchase of modern computer technology (hardware and software), the upskilling of teachers in order to integrate this technology into their teaching and a programme of on-going maintenance and technical support to schools.

The INTO also argues that a major investment in school ICT for administrative purposes including hardware, software and the training of personnel is required to meet the information needs of a modern education system and also that major ICT investment is required in the Department of Education and Science to facilitate the processing of information electronically.