

OUR CHILDREN OUR FUTURE

Support primary
and special education



**Key priorities
for primary and
special education
in Budget 2026**

A pre-budget submission from the
Irish National Teachers' Organisation

Primary and special education snapshot



€224
current 'per
pupil' grant
(the primary
capitation
grant is the
main source of
school funding)

22.5
is the average
class size in
Ireland¹

556,084
pupils¹

8,827
pupils in special
schools¹

3,229
primary schools¹

1,262
small schools
having four or
less mainstream
teachers²

963
DEIS schools¹

129
special schools³

11,647
pupils in special
classes in
mainstream
schools¹

2,630
special classes
in mainstream
primary schools⁴

1,517
primary schools
have three or
more special
education posts⁵



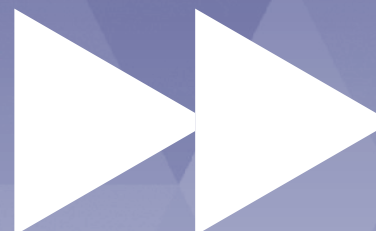
¹ Education Indicators 2024, July 2025

² Figures provided by the Department of Education and Youth (*Small Schools Project*)

³ Parliamentary Question, 12 June 2025 - Special Educational Needs – Thursday, 12 June 2025 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

⁴ Figure provided by the NCSE

⁵ INTO analysis



Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) strongly believes that primary and special education is the foundation on which all other facets of society are built. As the largest education union on the island of Ireland, representing 53,164¹ teachers, we are pleased to publish our annual pre budget submission. This document sets out four key strategic priorities which we are calling on the government to support in the forthcoming budget. They are informed by the voices of our members, including teachers and principals in Irish primary and special schools.

Following the General Election last year, the Budget this October will be the first real measure of the current coalition Government's commitment to supporting primary and special education.

Earlier this summer we convened a National Lobby Day in Dublin, with over 130 TDs and Senators in attendance to meet with our members. We set out clearly and passionately why the primary and special education system needs a budget boost this October.

This budget is the chance to turn words into action – We must not waste it!

- We can reduce the financial pressures on schools and parents by increasing the main source of **school funding**, the primary capitation grant, by €75 per pupil.
- We can take action to reduce Ireland's **overcrowded classes** by reducing the average by two pupils this year, ensuring every child learns in a classroom more in line with the EU norms.
- We can support our rural communities by expanding the highly successful *Small Schools Pilot project*, which provides administrative support to clusters of **small schools** to give them a much-needed boost.
- And we can show we are serious about supporting the delivery of **special education** in our primary schools by introducing Special Education Needs Coordinators to better coordinate the provision of special education at primary level.

In taking these steps our Government will show it is serious about its commitment to supporting primary education, and honour the commitments set out in the Programme for Government. Teachers expect that their Trojan efforts in the classroom will be boosted by strategic investment to deliver the world class primary education system to which we all aspire.

As Nelson Mandela said:

**“Children are our
greatest treasure.
They are our future.”**



Increase the main Primary Grant by €75 per pupil

1

Funding our primary and special schools must be a core responsibility of government. Yet these schools continually face a funding crisis!

This has placed an intolerable burden on school communities, with both teachers and parents increasingly involved in fundraising efforts simply to keep the lights on. School leaders have been left under severe stress as they struggle to keep schools running.

Every school should receive adequate funding to ensure the continued delivery of primary and special education in their community. This should not depend on cake sales, raffles, or the delaying of bill payments while school management wait for clarity on grants. It is time for a targeted uplift in the primary capitation grant, the main source of school funding.

The 2025/26 capitation grant, set at €224 per pupil, falls far short of what is required to operate a modern school. The Consumer Price Index shows that inflation has driven up the costs of essentials such as energy, insurance, cleaning, and teaching resources. Principals across the country have reported the escalating costs they face, and the growing

pressure to balance already-stretched budgets. Some schools have even felt forced to go public with their funding crises, a situation that is neither normal nor acceptable.

Adding to this pressure, temporary grants such as enhanced cleaning and cost-of-living supports have been cut in the last two budgets. As a result, schools now have less funding than before to meet rising costs.

The Programme for Government clearly states that capitation will be increased to reflect the growing cost of running schools and to ease the fundraising burden on parents. This commitment must now be honoured.

The INTO is calling on government to increase the primary capitation grant by €75 per pupil in Budget 2026. This uplift is essential, not only to support the basic operation of schools, but to ensure that all children, especially those who experience educational disadvantage, have access to a fully resourced and equitable education system.



The INTO has costed this proposal at €26.6 million in a full year.¹

Reduce average class sizes by two pupils

2

The INTO has long campaigned for smaller class sizes in Ireland. Primary class sizes here remain the largest in the European Union, with an average of 22.5 pupils per class compared to the EU average of 19¹.

The Programme for Government commits to reducing primary class sizes to 19 pupils during its term. **The INTO is calling for this reduction to begin in earnest, with a two-point drop in class size from September 2026.**

Reducing class sizes by two pupils would have a transformative effect on primary education. It would allow teachers to better respond to the wide and evolving range of pupil needs in today's classrooms. Smaller classes mean more individual attention for each child, more effective use of modern teaching approaches, and stronger support for pupils with additional needs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Lowering class sizes would also show that the Irish government is serious about giving pupils here the same opportunities as

those elsewhere in the EU. This proposal is especially timely, with enrolment numbers projected to fall from 556,000 in 2024 to 533,000 by 2026². By maintaining current teacher numbers, the government can use this demographic shift to reduce class sizes at little extra cost to the exchequer.

With a new primary curriculum now being introduced, reducing class sizes would help schools deliver it as intended and ensure meaningful engagement for every pupil.

Overcrowded classrooms have long limited the potential of primary education in Ireland.

The time has come to take decisive action. The INTO is calling for a two-point reduction in class sizes at primary level from September 2026.



The INTO has costed this proposal at €45 million in a full year.³

¹ Education at a Glance, OECD Sept 2024

² DE Enrolment Projection Report March 2024

³ Pupil-Teacher Ratio – Wednesday, 7 May 2025 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

Build on the success of the Small Schools Pilot project

3

Small schools are tightly woven into the tapestry of rural life in Ireland, and it is imperative that we focus on supporting and strengthening them.

There is a strong sense of loyalty to, and identification with, small schools, and people often form emotional attachments to these institutions, which are intimately bound up with the life of a community. A child's years in primary education are their formative years, so policymakers must ensure that the thousands of pupils who attend small schools, and those who work in them, are adequately supported.

There is a wealth of research highlighting the strengths of small schools. Studies show that smaller schools achieve equal or higher levels of student achievement, better attendance, and greater participation in school activities. They also foster positive interactions between pupils, teachers, and parents. Pupils feel a strong sense of belonging, and parents tend to be more involved in school life. Research has also shown that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds fare better in smaller schools.

It is essential that the Government strengthen smaller schools. This will also support sustainable rural communities.

The current *Small Schools Action Research Project*, established in 2021, is due to conclude at the end of the 2025/26 school year. The project has brought small schools together in local clusters, enabling collaboration, the identification of shared challenges, and the trialling of innovative solutions.

The pilot includes six clusters of small schools, two in Galway, and one each in Donegal, Kerry,

Wicklow, and Waterford, with between three and five schools per cluster. Feedback from participating schools has been extremely positive and is echoed in the interim evaluation report recently published by the Department of Education and Youth. This independent review makes clear that the pilot has worked well for the schools involved.

The evaluation highlights broad agreement among stakeholders that the role of the cluster administration officer has been a success and should be extended to all small school clusters nationwide.

The INTO is calling for the national expansion of the pilot from September 2026, including the appointment of cluster administration officers, at executive officer grade, to groups of small schools. This key role provides vital administrative support, reduces the bureaucratic burden on principals, and allows teachers to focus on teaching and learning.

Rolling out these roles nationally would also build on the early success of the pilot, including improved recruitment, enhanced collaboration between peers, and shared curricular innovation, all of which support the long-term viability of small schools.

The Programme for Government commits to a new national small schools' project. The INTO is calling on the government to deliver on this promise by expanding the current pilot from September 2026.

The INTO has costed this proposal at €6 million in a full year.

Introduce Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs)

4

The INTO is committed to an inclusive education system that meets the needs of all children, particularly those with additional educational needs.

However, teachers cannot deliver this on their own. They need greater support from the Department of Education and Youth, its agencies, aegis bodies and other professionals.

Teachers play a central role in making inclusion a reality in schools. The Department and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) must acknowledge and address the needs and experiences of teachers, including their health and safety. **The extensive work teachers undertake to ensure that pupils with additional needs are supported to reach their full potential must be recognised.**

School staff must be provided with professional development opportunities, access to multi-disciplinary services, adequate resources and modern, purpose-built facilities. For any inclusion policy to succeed, school leaders, mainstream class teachers and those in special education settings must be properly supported.

A recent research paper from the Faculty of Education at Mary Immaculate College recommends that the role of the SENCO in Irish schools should be formalised and officially recognised in national policy. It also calls for dedicated, ring-fenced time to carry out SENCO duties and for the role to be included as part of each school's senior leadership team. This, the paper argues, would strengthen the SENCO's authority, leadership capacity, and overall impact on inclusive education.¹

The INTO's 2023 workload survey found that responding to special education needs was

the greatest source of workload pressure for both principals and class teachers. Almost all respondents agreed that every school should have a post of responsibility specifically designated for coordinating special education.

It is also worth noting that similar roles already exist in Northern Ireland, where they contribute positively to the co-ordination of special education in schools.

The Programme for Government includes a clear commitment to support students with disabilities in transitioning through all educational settings.

To ensure the effective delivery of special education in our primary schools, there is a clear need to strengthen school leadership capacity. **The INTO is calling for the introduction of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) as new, dedicated assistant principal roles in primary schools.** These roles would focus solely on coordinating special education provision within the school.

SENCO posts should initially be introduced in the estimated 1,517 schools with three or more special education teaching posts.



The INTO has costed this proposal at €14.2 million in a full year.

¹<https://nasenjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1471-3802.70019>

Overall cost

The full year cost of the four measures in the submission is €91.8 million.

Ireland invests **€812** per annum less per primary school pupil than the OECD average¹. The combined cost of our asks would bring an **increase of €165 per primary pupil** from September 2026. This would be first step towards closing the substantial funding gap in primary education during the lifetime of the current Government.



into 

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

01 804 7700
info@into.ie
www.into.ie

Vere Foster House
35 Parnell Square
Dublin 1
D01 ET35

¹Education at a Glance, September 2024