



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Response by
The Irish National Teachers' Organisation
(INTO)
To
Draft Budget 2015-16: Department of
Education

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A nation's greatness depends upon the education of its people

Vere Foster – First President – INTO

Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) is the largest teachers' union on the island of Ireland. The Organisation currently represents over 40,000 teachers, principals and vice-principals, with over 7,000 members in schools in the north of Ireland. We have carefully considered the draft education budget for 2015 – 16 and on behalf of INTO we now set out our response.

The Value of Education

Benjamin Disraeli said, *“Upon the education of the people of this country, the fate of this country depends”*. This is perhaps an observation that we should consider before we embark upon a strategy that INTO considers will have devastating consequences for our schools and colleges and which will irreparably damage the education of children not only for today but for at least a generation. It is a glaring disappointment that, in the opening paragraphs of the draft Education Budget consultation document, no mention is made of the value and importance of education; the only reference is to the overall cost.

In para 1.6 of the document entitled “Impact”, the document sets out the proposals to reduce:

- The Resource Budget which faces a funding gap of £162.5m or 8.4%;
- The Capital Budget which has been reduced by £36.1m or 19.7%.

In looking at these impacts, no mention is made of the consequences they will have on children, teachers and schools. The impacts are laid out solely in terms of the monetary cost. This clearly outweighs the value or importance of education to the young people in our schools or the overall economy.

Draft Budget 2015-16 Outcome

Resource Allocation

This section of the draft Budget sets out the proposed cuts in the resource budget and ultimately implies that schools will be able to effectively meet these financial restrictions within the defined period. In regard to resource allocation, the cuts proposed are described as presenting a “significant challenge” as if the responsibility for these cuts was in fact someone else's. The document also spells out the need to balance the budget. This reinforces once again, that while DE has an understanding of the cost of education, it lacks any appreciation of its value. It is gravely disappointing that in setting out this document there is no real acknowledgement of the impact these budgetary cuts will have.

INTO cannot accept that DE is proposing a draft budget as set out in Figure 1 [page 8] that falls so short of the baseline required funding. This should have immediately alerted DE to

the fact that the proposed budget reductions, in resource allocation, would not work without significant damage to children’s education and teacher employment. In effect, the proposed resource budget contradicts four of the five Departmental aims laid out in Section 4.2 of the Draft Budget document.

Capital allocation

The proposed reduction in capital funding may not seem to present the same “significant challenge” as the proposed resource allocation cuts. However, for the children being taught in substandard conditions or the teachers trying to provide a quality education in a damp draughty mobile, this proposed reduction is a real issue. Quality education requires quality buildings and given the pre-existing deficiencies in the schools estate, a decision to reduce the capital allocation is considered by INTO as folly. Indeed it contradicts the remaining Departmental aim as outlined in Section 4.2 of the draft Budget programme. Ultimately the quality of school buildings decline with age and delays in replacement and repair cost more in the long run. The real losers here are not only those currently learning and teaching in the many sub-optimal buildings, but those who will follow them into these poor learning environments. Therefore INTO would urge that the decisions to cut

- Major Capital Programme/TBUC Capital Programmes
- School Enhancement Programme (SEP)
- Minor Works Programme
- Youth Capital
- Other Capital Programmes

are reviewed to assess the impact that such cuts would have on the quality of education that will be delivered if these proposals are enacted. The document itself graphically displays the potential damage in Figure 2 [page 12] by showing the deviation from the baseline in such a dramatic fashion. Implementing such catastrophic cuts in this area will inevitably have serious consequences for those at the front line in education for years to come.

Strategic Priorities for Education

Section 4 of the document refers to DE’s strategic priorities for education. The Department’s vision is for “an education system that is recognised internationally for the quality of its teaching and learning and for the achievement of its young people, and of an education service that has at its centre a focus on the needs of children and young people”.

Para 4.2 states, “The Department wants to see every young person achieving to his or her potential at each stage of his or her development. This is supported by the following five goals:

- Raising standards for all;
- Closing the performance gap, increasing access and equity;
- Developing the education workforce;
- Improving the learning environment; and
- Transforming the governance and management of education”.

Paras 4.3 and 4.4 state, “The Department’s primary statutory duty is to promote the education of our young people and to ensure the effective implementation of education policy; and

4.4 A key emphasis is to ensure that every learner fulfils their full potential”.

These phrases are now, in the view of INTO, no more than high level aspirations. How any of these will be achieved in the face of huge and unprecedented cuts to resource and capital funding proposed in the document is a mystery. INTO expects the argument will be advanced that the front line delivery of quality education rests with schools and that DE provides a policy framework and adequate funding. This is a totally unacceptable argument to INTO and we will not accept such an abdication of responsibility by DE. The blame game will quickly begin when external evaluation of the education systems shows little or no improvement. Education is a collaborative process and when one party, in this case DE, no longer genuinely collaborates, then the other parties cannot be held responsible for the failings of the system. The loss of funding, teachers, support staff or other resources originates not with the schools but with the Department and its political masters.

Para 4.7 talks about the economy stating, “The future success of our economy and of society in general depends on there being a high quality education service that can compete with the best internationally. Equally, all of our young people have the right to a quality education that enables them to reach their full potential, a right enshrined not only in our own legislation, but in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.”

This statement is again only aspirational. For too long, as the document illustrates, DE has engaged in what can only be referred to as short termism. Monies are made available for 1 or 2 year projects and then withdrawn as funding streams close. The level of cuts proposed in this document will impact in every school and classroom causing damage to the economy that will take a generation to unwind. The document talks about prioritising early years. However, when you slash the funding available for the remainder of the child’s education, the intervention at the early year’s stage is already lost. In the view of INTO, the NI Executive needs to prioritise education and educational funding and develop a strategy that ensures funding is secured and index linked for at least the next decade. As these cuts

manifest themselves, the economy will not become a high value economy, but will remain low value with significant levels of youth employment as a result of these proposals.

In respect of outcomes, the document makes great play of DE and the Executives successes. The page and a half of positive changes are significant and have meaningful improvements, but unfortunately these are largely historical in nature. The budgetary reductions, as set out in this draft budget, make it clear that such outcomes won't be realisable in the short or medium term future. In addition DE claims credit for the increases in pupil performance. INTO rejects this shameless attempt to erase the contribution of individual teachers in individual schools. Should these cuts be implemented, INTO expects that those who helped deliver the positive improvements, which DE is so keen to claim, may be rewarded with notice of compulsory redundancy.

5. Resource Budget: Inescapable Pressures and Proposed Reductions

Section 5 states, "There is no doubt that the reductions in the Education Resource Budget will pose a major challenge to the education sector, as a whole, during 2015-16. It is important that in meeting that challenge the key issues of raising standards and delivering frontline services are maintained wherever possible and that the finite resources available are prioritised carefully and used to greatest effect".

This statement is interpreted by INTO as simply, "you must do more with less", again failing to recognise the value of investing in education. The draft budget seriously undermines work to raise standards and to deliver frontline services. In addition, INTO questions the monies wasted in failing to establish the Education and Skills Authority and the cost of establishing the new single Education and Library Board.

Ultimately the outworking of all these inescapable pressures will be that at least 1000 teachers will have their employment ended, class sizes will increase, fewer resources will become available to schools, children with learning and other difficulties will suffer as support staff lose their jobs and ultimately schools will be forced to make decisions, not on the importance and value of education, but simply on the cost.

"In determining strategic priorities, the Minister's focus has been on protecting these frontline services as far as possible, promoting equality and raising education standards." For INTO, paragraph 5.7 falls into two parts. The first part is probably true whilst the second part, we would contend, is at complete odds with the reality this budget will bring about. This budget will undermine equality, threaten standards and undo the good work of countless teachers and their support colleagues.

Para 5.8 makes reference to "difficult choices" having to be made. INTO wishes to state that these difficult choices will be made by principals and teachers in schools who will struggle to deliver the quality education referenced throughout the consultation paper.

There will be no support from DE as principals and governors wrestle with the challenges this budget will create in every school. DE, instead of seeking sympathy, need to realise and accept that should they proceed with this draft budget, they will erode further the already limited trust they enjoy in schools with the governors, teachers and principals who will have the onerous task of doing their financial dirty work for them. These are the people deserving of sympathy.

6. Assessment of Impacts – Equality and Good Relations

The document assures us in 6.1, “The Department is committed to ensuring that it fulfils its duties under Section 75 (1) and (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in relation to having due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and to have regard to desirability of promoting good relations. While paragraph 6.2 goes on, “Tackling educational inequalities and disadvantage is a core priority for the Department and the budget will continue to be deployed in support of this objective. The promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations is also an important part of ongoing policy development, legislative activities and operational programmes. In managing the proposed Resource Budget reductions, the Department is making every effort to protect front line services whilst cutting out unnecessary administration”.

INTO’s response to this is to call on DE to instigate, without delay, a full Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on these proposed budgetary cuts. INTO has, for some time, made it clear that it is unacceptable practice on the part of DE to be conducting a desk top equality screening and then advising that there is no adverse impact on any of the groups specified in legislation. Further references to tackling educational inequalities cause INTO to ask the question, if these proposals are implemented, how can the most vulnerable in society not suffer? It is inevitable that children with special needs or other educational difficulties will suffer if teachers or classroom assistants are made redundant. We must ask, will children in the grammar sector fare better than those in the non-selective post-primary institutions? If the past has anything to offer then the answer will be “YES”. Will children in maintained schools be treated differently from those in controlled schools? Even if it is only perceived, it is likely to give rise to a bias; and will the integrated sector fare better or worse? Will statements take longer to undertake for those young people with special and particular needs? These are some of the questions already being posed by schools.

Those in higher social classes will continue to fund additional educational activities while the poor in society go without. We also call into question the reliability of the data sources that DE uses to conduct its screening given that in other exercises this has been flawed. INTO therefore again repeat the need for a full EQIA with published data sources.

In para 6.9 the document repeats the mantra, “In determining strategic priorities the Minister’s focus has been on protecting frontline services as far as possible, while promoting

equality and raising education standards.” INTO is of the view that the draft budget is a direct attack on school budgets and the focus is on reducing costs above all. For the Minister to claim he is protecting frontline services, as far as possible, is frankly ridiculous. The introduction of the phrase, “as far as possible”, in the view of INTO, is a fig leaf that is incapable of covering the Ministerial embarrassment.

Other Comments

Throughout this document, snippets are given from budgetary statements or projections. As the largest teaching union in Ireland, we do not propose to engage in a scenario where Peter is robbed to pay Paul. In serving the teaching profession we have consistently seen schools attempting, over the years, to manage financial pressures and it is clear in these circumstances that all resources are necessary and important to the functioning of an individual school or college. To engage in detailed analysis of individual budget items and play one off against the other does absolutely nothing other than reduce the education of children to a pound sign on a balance sheet. INTO demands DE abandon this draft budget, to think again about these proposals and look at the impact these will have on the quality of education and educational services that are deliverable.

Conclusion

DE describes this document as “challenging”. They also restate their strategic objectives for education including the need to protect front line services. Yet they do not assess how these budget reductions will impact on front line services or how they will impact on the delivery of their strategic objectives. It would appear that the actual delivery of front line services and the education of children are, for DE, only aspirational and the responsibility of individual schools to deliver.

For INTO the document is indeed challenging. However, we are prepared to campaign and mobilise those who deliver front line services to campaign and protest against these proposed cuts. We cannot stand by and watch an attack on the fundamental building blocks of the education system – our schools, teachers and children.

During the economic difficulties in the Republic of Ireland, which required a bail out of the country by international institutions, not one teacher suffered compulsory redundancy. No teaching position was lost. This inevitably came from a decision by the Dail to ensure that strategic investment in education was maintained in spite of major economic problems. This decision ensured that as the recovery emerges there is available a workforce that is well educated and trained. INTO urges DE to look at this strategic approach and to adopt a similar model. Otherwise, when a recovery in the economy does occur, the quality of the workforce available may be such that only firms that pay low wages will be interested in locating here or worse, jobs will be lost to countries where educational investment has been maintained in times of austerity.

We urge DE to: think again before it is too late; not to implement this proposed budget; to move away from a short term approach to educational funding and to look internally as to how they value education and the contribution education makes within the wider economy.

Finally we ask that there is immediate engagement with INTO as part of this consultation to attempt to find a better way forward which places education centre stage for the NI executive and DE. It is vitally important that DE and the Executive as a whole come to appreciate the value of education more than the cost. There are no better words to conclude our consultation response than those of the first President of INTO, Vere Foster, *“A nation’s greatness depends upon the education of its people.”* With that comment we commend this response to the Department of Education.