

Strategy Statement for 2021-23

Response to the Department of
Education consultation on behalf
of the INTO

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Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) represents over 42,000 teachers in primary and special schools in the Republic of Ireland. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education (DE) consultation on a *Strategy Statement for 2021-23*.

This strategy is being devised during a period of significant disruption in the education system. The unprecedented closure of school buildings for a period of almost four months resulted in schools and teachers undertaking support for remote learning in an unprecedented way. This was achieved with little or no significant investment or guidance from the State in supporting this change. Teachers were required to devise and implement a strategy which best suited their school community and implement it without access to support, to their school buildings for a long period, or to adequate ICT infrastructure.

The reopening of schools in September was rightly a strategic priority for government. Irish society has always placed a value on education and schools, and the value of schooling for children, in terms of their intellectual, physical, social and mental development and well-being, has come in to sharp focus during the pandemic. The INTO has supported the safe and orderly opening of schools, in line with public health advice, and we welcome the approach taken by the DE to include stakeholders in meaningful consultations to achieve this. We believe that such consultation must form part of the strategic approach of the DE in the coming period.

Reflecting on this, it seems that the *Strategy Statement for 2021-23* must reflect not only the key role played by primary education in our society, but also on the critical role played by teachers in that. The crisis has exposed flaws which have been apparent to teachers in primary schools for many years, and which have been the subject of continued demands from the INTO, including large class sizes, the lack of organisation of a supply of substitute teachers, underfunding of schools, inadequate ICT infrastructure, and the huge pressure placed on principal teachers to run their schools in a system which devolves responsibility to them without adequate and appropriate support. Unless the department can demonstrate that it has learned from this crisis, and incorporated that learning into its strategic planning, this strategy statement will be of little value.

Our submission on the development of the *2019-2021 Strategy Statement* rightly focused on the slowing down of the proliferation of initiatives and programmes in schools and called for a reduction in demonstration of compliance and paperwork. We acknowledge that this was taken on board in the *Statement of Strategy for 2019-22*, and in particular that this was a focus of the work of the Primary Education Forum. This approach has provided some much-needed breathing space in primary schools, which allowed for the bedding in of initiatives. This has been disrupted by the pandemic, but a similar approach will be required to allow the system to find equilibrium after the disruption of 2020.

In each section below, the boxed text indicates a commitment made in the *Programme for Government – Our Shared Future* (2020)

Goal 1: Improving the learning experience and success of learners

Curriculum

- ⌘ **Continue to review and reform the primary curriculum.**
- ⌘ **Develop inclusive and age appropriate RSE and SPHE curricula across primary and post-primary levels, including an inclusive programme on LGBTI+ relationships and making appropriate legislative changes if necessary.**
- ⌘ **Continue to review and reform the teaching and learning of Irish and increase the emphasis on spoken Irish in the classroom.**
- ⌘ **Expand the programme in which PE is taught through Irish to every primary school.**

The review and reform of the primary curriculum must remain a strategic priority. The INTO acknowledges that curriculum development has slowed down and that this is welcome, as the pace of change needs to ensure that there is time for bedding in. Adequate time must be provided for teachers to consider the revised draft curriculum framework, to ensure that teachers' voice is central to the process. The three-year implementation period for the *Primary Language Curriculum* needs to be retained, but also to take account of the delay caused by COVID-19. In addition, the *Primary Language Curriculum* must be supported by an integrated resource package for the teaching of Irish in English-medium schools, something the INTO has been looking for since the *Primary School Curriculum* of 1999. *Séideán Sí* for the Irish-medium sector must also be updated. We also call for the expansion of the content and language integrated learning (CLIL). Curriculum revisions must be supported with quality sustained professional development (CPD). Such system led CPD must be provided in school time, and at no cost to the teacher. In short, we submit curriculum review and reform must be afforded adequate time for consultation to ensure the voice of teachers are included in the process. It must then be followed by a sustained programme of professional development support over a period of time to enable the ownership and embedding of change.

Digital Learning

- ⌘ **Develop and embed a digital education strategy, where teachers and students are supported in providing and learning from on-line resources and ensuring that digital literacy forms a part of the primary and post-primary curriculum.**
- ⌘ **Use the digital education strategy to engage pupils and students in structuring and shaping their own learning experience and engagement.**



There has been an enormous focus on digital learning in 2020, primarily in the context of supporting learning during school closures. The experience of digital learning during this period has been very mixed – in some cases good practice flourished and schools and individual teachers used digital technology to engage with pupils. However, it did expose further inequalities in the system, based on access to expertise and training, access to broadband and the availability of ICT infrastructure (hardware, software and support). A strategic priority must be to ensure equality of access to digital learning, through investment in infrastructure, professional development, technical support and high-speed broadband in all primary schools.

Well-being

‖ **Improve access to supports for positive mental health in schools.**

The previous strategic plan focused on well-being as a priority and it is welcome that this is reiterated. The reopening of schools saw a focus on the implementation of well-being initiatives. In order to ensure that the well-being of pupils is properly supported, teachers need access to good quality professional development in this area. Consideration should be given to introducing counselling services for pupils in schools.

In tandem with a focus on the well-being of pupils, there is also a requirement for support for teacher well-being. This should include not only the provision of the employee assistance service, but also provision for support and initiatives at school level. The coaching programmes available to school leaders should be adapted and made available to all teachers as part of a comprehensive professional development support service.

Goal 2: Increasing progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and learners with special educational needs

DEIS/Educational Disadvantage

‖ **Complete the new DEIS identification model ensuring the extension of DEIS status to schools that are identified as being suitable.**

While the previous strategic plan prioritised the implementation of the DEIS plan, progress regarding this priority was disappointing. The INTO acknowledges consultations regarding the new identification model, the development of which is welcomed, but progress in translating this into identification of schools and supports is too slow. We make no apology for repeating our 2018 submission. The new DEIS identification process should be published immediately and resources provided to enable additional schools to become part of DEIS.

The improvements which have occurred in recent years in class size have not been reflected in the DEIS staffing schedules. The reduction to the schedule announced in Budget 2021 does little to address this. While the additional number of pupils to appoint a further teacher in mainstream schools has been reduced (in larger schools) from 28 to 25, the DEIS ratios remain, in the main, at their

previous levels so that, for example, in a DEIS band one school, 22 remains the number of children required to employ a further teacher in a vertical school. Not changing the ratios in DEIS schools has reduced the sharpness of the focus on tackling educational disadvantage and these ratios could be improved immediately with very little implication for overall resourcing. In addition to reducing the DEIS ratio which currently applies to DEIS band one schools only, the DEIS ratio should apply to DEIS band two schools also. The most disadvantaged schools should have their ratios reduced further to ensure a ratio of 15:1 in junior classes and a ratio of 18:1 in senior classes applies. This ratio applies in practice in some schools due to staffing allocations under previous schemes to tackle disadvantage. If the strategic plan is serious about tackling educational disadvantage, we submit this must be borne out in improved staffing ratios for DEIS schools.

Special Education

‖ **Ensure students get the right assistance at the right time building on the learnings from the pilot currently underway and subject to further consultation.**
‖ **Ensure each child with a special educational need has an appropriate school place in line with their constitutional right.**
‖ **Further progress the move towards a needs-based, responsive set of state supports for students with special educational needs and expand early intervention teams in schools over the next five years.**

The system allocation of teachers and SNAs to schools to support children with special educational needs must be accompanied by a robust and fair appeals system. The current system of a paper-based appeal of an allocation does not enjoy the confidence of teachers or principals. The more comprehensive review of allocation carried out by the NCSE is often protracted and requires enormous paperwork and administration at school level. The poor communication and mixed messages which accompanied the process in early 2020 must be not be repeated.

In order to ensure proper inclusion of children with special education needs in schools, children must have access to the full range of therapy/nursing supports in the school. The provision of these services has not kept pace with the enrolment of children with SEN in their local schools. Children in special schools and special classes must also have access to the full range of supports, particularly for complex needs. The therapies in schools pilot project must be extended to all schools over the lifetime of this strategic plan and the planned introduction of nursing supports to schools must be progressed.

The issue of managing challenging behaviour, sometimes in association with managing special education needs, is one which is of great concern for INTO members. The lack of guidance or training in this area leaves teachers and other pupils vulnerable to assaults and injuries. The DE has long promised guidelines in this area and they must be delivered as soon as possible. We regret that we have to reiterate this call, which we also made in 2018.



Goal 3: Helping those delivering education to continuously improve

Teacher Supply

‡ **Seek to make further progress in reducing pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.**

While the issue of maintaining a proper supply of teachers was not explicitly referenced in the previous strategic plan, it did appear in the action plans. The continued failure to include teacher union representation on the various structures set up under the Teacher Supply Working Group means that an important stakeholder group's voice is not included in the planning of this important issue. We acknowledge the publication of the data report *Developing a Teacher Demand and Supply Model for Ireland 2020-2036*. However, we reject the narrative that falling demographics in primary schools should lead to less demand for teachers. 'No policy change' assumptions are unacceptable when the DE is well aware of the continuing existence of very large average and actual class sizes. In our view, the demographic situation provides an opportunity to reduce class size, in line with the commitments made in the *Programme for Government*, but also to provide for the retention and expansion of the substitute supply panels, maintain substitute cover for all teacher absences, and expand seconded teacher support across a range of programmes (e.g. PDST, NCSE). In this context, we welcome the improvement in the staffing schedule contained in Budget 2021 as a first step.

Continuing Professional Development

‡ **In order to support them we will invest in teachers' continuous professional development.**

The concept of teachers as learners throughout their professional careers is well recognised in the system, but very poorly supported. Teachers are not afforded time to engage in their professional development, and they are expected to bear the costs themselves in many cases. This is in contrast to the approach taken by good employers in many professional areas. If the DE wishes to support the concept of teachers as learners, then this must be rectified.

In this regard, the Teacher Fee Refund scheme is entirely inadequate and has provided significantly diminished average fee refunds to teachers over recent years. The commitment given in the action plans of 2019 to review and reform this scheme must be fulfilled, including the provision of additional funding. While the review has been completed, it is essential the steering committee is re-established and that the budget for the scheme is substantially increased, and there must be ringfenced funding for teachers' own CPD needs rather than 'top down' system needs dominating allocated resources.

In addition to teachers' professional needs, the system also requires teachers to upskill, to enable the implementation of new programmes, revisions to the curriculum and initiatives. Professional development for system driven change must be delivered within school time, and at no cost to teachers. The 'trickle down' approach, where one member of staff receives training and is expected to upskill their colleagues, has failed. A whole school approach to CPD is essential and should be complemented by sustained support at school level by the PDST.

A DE approach which is serious about helping those at the centre of education provision to continuously improve must address the conspicuous lack of support for teachers as learners.

School Leadership

‡ **Develop innovative measures to support school leadership and the quality of teaching, informed by data and a focus on student learning and potential.**

Principal teachers have carried an extraordinary burden during the period of the pandemic. The structure of the primary education system which seeks to devolve responsibility to schools, without the supports required, was exposed. The voluntary nature of the management of individual schools leaves principals answerable to their BOMs, but also providing information, support and documentation to them. The vast majority of primary schools operate with minimal finance, human resource management or IT support. This must be remedied.

We welcome the commitment to support school leadership, but the supports needed are well documented. The additional release time (for teaching principals and deputies) provided for the 2020/21 school year must be retained and expanded upon. It is imperative that the middle management layer removed from schools since 2009 is restored; its decimation continues to undermine schools' ability to realise a number of the goals referenced in this document. The thresholds for the appointment of administrative principals and deputies must be revised to take account of all staff, not just teachers in the school. There should be administrative principals in all schools with special classes. The threshold for appointing administrative deputies should be lowered. All special schools should have an administrative principal.

There is repeated evidence that the quality of school leadership impacts directly on the quality of teaching and learning in the school. All of the above supports improve the ability of school leaders to spend time and energy to focus on student learning and potential. Support for school leaders must also be reflected in school leaders' pay packets. The outstanding award to primary principals and deputy principals must be paid.

Goal 4: Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community

Patronage and Management of Primary schools

‡ **Achieve the target of at least 400 multi-denominational primary schools by 2030 to improve parental choice.**

‡ **Expand and prioritise the transfer of viable schools to community national schools.**

‡ **Work with communities to ensure the provision of clear, non-partisan information on the preparation for, and the consequences of, the divestment process and to respond to queries raised.**

‡ **Work towards doubling the number of young people currently in Irish-medium schools.**

‡ **Provide Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcoláiste, where there is strong demand.**



The INTO supported the Forum on Pluralism and Patronage and the recommendations which emerged from it. We are disappointed at the slow progress in achieving increased diversity in the patronage of primary schools. We further note that the processes being used by the DE to communicate with school communities, including with teachers, about divestment has not been successful and should be revisited.

Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018

Since the commencement of the section on the act in relation to the designation of schools to compel them to open special classes for children with special educational needs, and the invoking of this statutory provision by the DE, there has been considerable concern in schools. In particular, the timing of communication of decisions on designation on the last day of the school year was grossly unfair and unnecessary. In addition, the assessments carried out by the DE of the capacity of schools to accommodate special classes have been regarded as not fair to schools who have used their accommodation in a way which meets the needs of their school communities e.g. to facilitate parents' rooms etc.

In compelling a school to open a special class or admit a pupil with special educational needs, there must always be a consideration of the needs of other pupils and the availability of resources, the school environment, suitability of space, topography, and professional development in making such a decision. When special classes are established, there must be ongoing support and training for the teachers involved. The additional administrative burden on the principal of a school with special classes must be recognised and additional support provided.

Small Schools

- ⌘ **Continue to recognise the importance of small schools to communities across Ireland.**
- ⌘ **Develop technical support service teams, which will enable innovation in schools and clusters of schools.**

The Small Schools Symposium held in June 2019 confirmed the importance of small schools to local communities in Ireland. The challenges of youth population decline and the urbanisation of Ireland are recognised, but the key role of a school in keeping a community is clear. However, supporting and recognising the value of these schools will not guarantee their existence. Practical supports for teaching principals, such as leadership and management time, sufficient well-paid caretaking and secretarial support and a reduction in paperwork and bureaucracy are required. All initiatives and demands on school must be stress tested against the ability of small schools and teaching principals to carry them out. The proposed, well researched pilot project to explore how clusters can support small school must be implemented, with funding from government.

Goal 5: Providing better national planning and support services

- ⌘ **Provide greater integration of the advisory service of the Schools' Inspectorate, with supports such as continuing professional development (CPD), leadership development and specialist support services (e.g. NEPS, NCSE).**

The advisory role of the inspectorate is one which has been largely absent in schools in recent years. The focus of the inspectorate on data gathering, accountability and checklists for the implementation of initiatives has undermined the professional and supportive relationship which previously existed between inspectors at local level and the schools in which they work. Development of this advisory role and integration with the existing support services would be a welcome development in schools.

Improving the quality of services provided by the Department of Education

Many teachers find their experience of accessing services from the department frustrating. Teachers interact with the DE directly in relation to queries on their pay and terms and conditions and are often unable to get a response to their queries in a timely basis. We acknowledge that the DE runs the largest payroll in the State, but the slow pace of the development of a new payroll system to replace the antiquated payroll software used is very concerning. Any amendments to this system seem to require vast effort and the demands of changes such as those to illness benefit and real-time revenue have threatened to overwhelm the system on several occasions. Resources must be provided to ensure that teachers are paid accurately and in a timely manner. We are extremely concerned with the timeframe for the payment of those being appointed to positions for the first time. It is often a matter of some weeks before any payment is made. In addition, teachers in the Single Public Service Pension Scheme have yet to receive the benefit statements required by law. This breaching of the 2012 act represents a particularly egregious example of poor service by the department. Benefit statements are essential for teachers who wish to plan for their financial security in retirement.

Gaeilge

- ⌘ **Provide a comprehensive policy for the Irish language from pre-primary education to teacher education for all schools.**
- ⌘ **Increase supports to An Comhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscoilíochta (COGG).**

Aithníonn muid go bhfuil dul chun cinn déanta ag an roinn maidir le ciorcaláin srl a chur ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge. Ach uaireanta bíonn moill ann agus acmhainní agus foilseacháin eile ag dul amach ag scoileanna. Ach má tá na spriocanna atá leagtha amach do Ghaeilge sna scoileanna le baint amach, caithfidh séirbhís iomlán a bheith ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge i gach ghné de saol na scoile. Caithfear tacaíocht cheart a thabhairt do COGG agus don pholasáí don oideachas Gaeltachta.



Buildings

- ✦ Place the Minor Works Grant on a permanent footing for schools.
- ✦ Deliver a programme to build and modernise PE and school sport facilities.
- ✦ Commit to a comprehensive review of school forward planning policy, recognising particularly the need for adequate supports for children with special educational needs, and the need to sustain green planning and green construction for schools in the future.
- ✦ Expand the Energy Efficiency Upgrade Pilot Programme for Schools.

The Government has outlined a comprehensive programme in relation to school buildings and this is welcome. However, the fallout from the western building systems schools debacle has highlighted for us again the workload and stress placed on school principals involved in building projects. Support from the DE for the members in these schools was found wanting. It is essential that support is available at local level for principals and BOMs in implementing building projects. Schools need support in areas such as project management, evaluation of tenders and compiling snag lists. This could be facilitated through links with ETBs at local level, or the appointment of clerks of works for larger projects.

There is a welcome focus on the environmental sustainability of buildings, other elements of design needs to be considered. All schools should be built in accordance with the principles of universal design, to ensure accessibility and sustainable use of the building by people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. The importance of good ventilation, and of outdoor spaces which are usable in all weathers, has been highlighted during the pandemic.

Goal 6: Implementing evidence-based policies

There is an abundance of evidence available to the DE which should underpin their strategic planning. This evidence points largely to a system which is performing well, despite underinvestment.

Such evidence has long been available, including evidence that:

- Ireland has the largest class sizes in the EU, well above the European average class size of 20. Yet one in five primary pupils in Ireland is taught in supersized classes of 30 or more children.
- Ireland has an index of school staff shortage of 0.08 (the OECD average was 0.01) (*Education Policy Outlook: Ireland* OECD 2020).
- *Education at a Glance 2020* (OECD 2020) shows Ireland as 14th of 23 EU countries in per-pupil spending at the primary school level. This leaves us behind countries such as Austria, the UK, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Portugal, Germany and Slovenia. Total education expenditure per student in 2016 was down on 2010 levels by 18% across primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education. In 2016, expenditure on primary to tertiary education in Ireland as a proportion of gross domestic product, at 3.5%, was one of the lowest rates in the OECD, where the average was 5% (*Education Policy Outlook: Ireland* OECD 2020).

- Public satisfaction with education was the fifth highest in OECD countries (*Government at a Glance 2020*, OECD) and teachers are among the top five most trusted professionals in Ireland – 89% of people polled trusted teachers. (*Veracity Ireland Survey 2020*).
- Irish primary school aged children performed better than average in international achievement tests. In the *2017 PIRLS Report*, Ireland's primary school children were "best in Europe and OECD countries for reading skills" (DES Press Release, December 2017) and in the *2016 TIMSS Report*, Irish fourth-class students ranked ninth out of 49 countries in maths and 19th of 47 countries in science.
- In relation to the quality of teachers the review panel in the *Report of the International Review Panel on the Structure of Initial Teacher Education Provision in Ireland* (Sahlberg Report 2012) concluded that the academic standard of entrants to teacher education in Ireland "is amongst the highest, if not the highest in the world". According to principals' reports in *PISA 2018*, 78% of teachers in Ireland had attended a professional development programme in the three months prior to the PISA test, which was well above the average of 53% (*Education Policy Outlook: Ireland* OECD 2020).
- Commenting on the quality of school leadership, the same report noted "Ireland's *PISA 2015* index of instructional leadership, measuring principals' engagement in the leadership of teaching and learning, was slightly higher than on average across the OECD at 0.06, compared to 0.01. In particular, in 2015, Irish school leaders reported engaging in consultative leadership practices more often than their OECD counterparts: in *PISA 2015*, 76% of leaders reported providing staff with opportunities to participate in school decision-making and 40% reported asking teachers to review management practices at least once a month, compared to OECD averages of 72% and 34%. According to *PISA 2015*, all school leaders in Ireland report that self-evaluation processes take place at their school, and 95% receive external evaluations, compared to OECD averages of 93% and 75%, respectively (*Education Policy Outlook: Ireland* OECD 2020).

So, we urge the DE to use the evidence available to them to ensure investment and resources are secured for primary and special schools to ensure this continued success.

Conclusion

We acknowledge the commitment of the Government to building a world-class education system from early years to higher and further education, espousing principles of excellence, inclusion and sustainability. If this commitment is to move beyond aspiration and translate in practical measures, it is critical that the department listen to the expertise of those who work in the system and that there is meaningful consultation and engagement with them. In addition, the Department of Education needs to secure appropriate resources to ensure the delivery of that world class education system, and work effectively to put those commitments into practice.