



Educate
Together

Budget 2024

Pre-budget submission 2024

Educate Together

Ireland's equality-based schools

Further information:

Luke O'Shaughnessy, Communications Manager

01 4292500 / info@educatetogether.ie



Budget 2024 - Educate Together is calling on the Government to:

1) Prioritise education

Bring education budget investment in line with the OECD average of 4.5% of GDP

2) Re-balance school patronage

Invest in the State's reconfiguration programme

3) Fund primary schools

Maintain the primary school capitation grant at €258 per pupil, as announced in Budget 2023

4) Support school volunteers

Increase voluntary management body grants by 50%

5) Invest in inclusion

Provide funding to re-balance school provision

6) Pilot nurture schools

Establish a national Nurture Schools pilot and support schools to implement a Nurture approach



About Educate Together

Educate Together is the representative body for 117 equality-based schools in Ireland. A registered charity, Educate Together is the management body for 96 national schools and patron (or joint patron /trustee partner) of 21 second-level schools, including voluntary secondary schools, community schools and community colleges. Educate Together is an independent non-governmental organisation (NGO) which advocates for changes in areas of educational policy that will have a significant impact on generations of young people in Ireland.

As the representative body for the fastest-growing school sector, Educate Together works closely with the Department of Education (DE) and other partners to ensure the smooth running of the primary and second-level education system. As an equality-based school patron, we provide a comprehensive Ethical Education curriculum. We strive to ensure that every one of the 38,000 children and young people in our schools is supported to achieve their full potential. We are also working to increase access to Educate Together schools in order to meet the rapidly increasing demand for equality-based education, in line with government policy.

Educate Together is proud to have a reputation as an inclusive school network, welcoming students from a range of backgrounds and supporting every child to belong and achieve, whatever their background and educational needs. 65% of Educate Together national schools and 81% of Educate Together second-level schools include specialist autism classes; a much higher proportion than other sectors.



Introduction

Budget 2024 is an opportunity for the Government to live up to its stated aims for Ireland's education system, and to properly resource that system via a range of targeted and improved supports to schools, management bodies and the Department of Education's budget. Educate Together proposes the following changes to properly address the challenges currently faced in Irish education, and to take full advantage of our system's strengths:

1) Prioritise education

- **Increase the overall education budget to bring investment in line with the OECD average of 4.5% of GDP**

The rate of investment in education per child in Ireland consistently lags behind what is invested in other OECD countries. This leaves many school communities across the country having to fundraise in order to make ends meet. This creates inequalities and limits the potential of our children and young people. Educate Together is calling for an increase to the overall education budget to bring investment in line with the OECD average of 4.5% of GDP.

2) Re-balance School Patronage

- **Invest in the State's reconfiguration programme**

The Government launched a 'reconfiguration' programme in 2022 to identify religious-run schools which could transfer to multi-denominational patronage. Educate Together has repeatedly pointed to the lack of funding for this programme as a significant barrier to progress. The lack of specific funding for the process raises serious questions about the government's ability to achieve its own target of 400 multi-denominational schools by 2030 (as set out in the 2020 Programme for Government). Educate Together is calling on the Government to properly resource the reconfiguration programme via a number of targeted measures and reforms.



Introduction (continued)

3) Fund primary schools

- **Maintain the primary school capitation grant at €258 per pupil, as announced in Budget 2023, and make this a permanent feature**

Government grants only meet around half of the costs of running a primary school, leaving families in many cases to foot the rest of the bill. At a time of continued utility cost increases, this exacerbates inequalities, since wealthier school communities can raise more funds. Funding for school books is welcome, and provides some relief to families. However, the cost-of-living crisis means schools are facing unprecedented energy, insurance and other costs. The once-off additional funding provided for in Budget 2023 at the rate of €75 per pupil needs to be made permanent. The €258 per pupil capitation grant for primary schools need to be maintained, simply to enable primary schools to pay their bills in the coming school year.

4) Support school volunteers

- **Increase management body grants by 50%**

The lack of proper funding for voluntary management bodies, who support two-thirds of all schools, is a cause for serious concern, as they struggle to meet escalating demands with minimal State aid. Volunteer boards of management provide huge added value to our schools and our education system, but these boards need professional supports. In the last 15 years, Educate Together's school network has more than doubled in size, in response to parental demand and in line with government policy. Yet Educate Together's minimal management body grant has been cut in that time. We are calling for an increase of at least 50% to the management body grant so we can provide the professional support that boards of management and school leaders need and deserve.



Introduction (continued)

5) Invest in inclusion

- **Provide one-off funding to develop a comprehensive plan to re-balance school provision**
- **Ensure sufficient multi-annual funding to implement the plan**

Poor planning has left our education system out-of-step with the needs of children and young people. Families of autistic children and those with other additional needs face impossible challenges in accessing services and school places. A comprehensive strategy and plan are required to re-balance provision so that every child can access a suitable school place in their local area, as well as suitable therapeutic and other supports. Significant investment in our education system is necessary to make our education system work for more children and young people and their families. The introduction of a wide-ranging package of measures, as outlined below, will surely improve the daily life of those in our school communities.

6) Pilot Nurture Schools

- **Establish a national pilot to demonstrate the positive outcome of the Nurture approach for students across Ireland, like that carried out in Northern Ireland**
- **Provide every school with access to CPD, and the allocation of appropriate staffing and skills to implement a Nurture approach**

The Nurture Schools approach is an evidence-based and cost-effective intervention which successfully provides specialised, student supports where no other options exist. Such supports are trauma-informed and address social, emotional and behavioural barriers that get in the way of learning, helping students to get back on track. Currently this approach is promoted in the National Wellbeing Strategy and Wellbeing Continuum of Support Framework, but schools are not resourced to implement it. Educate Together has supported a third of our schools to adopt this approach, with positive outcomes demonstrated by an external evaluation, mirroring findings in Northern Ireland and internationally. We now want all schools to be resourced to implement the Nurture approach, as provided for in the Government's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023).



1) Invest in education in line with the OECD average

- **Increase the overall education budget to bring investment in line with the OECD average of 4.5% of GDP**

Ireland currently rankes the lowest out of 40 OECD countries in terms of how much of its national wealth it invests into education. Just 3% of our GDP is spent on educational institutions here, compared to an OECD average of 4.5% (OECD, Education at a Glance 2021). Chronic underinvestment is beginning to show, with serious concerns now emerging at all levels of our education system.

For decades in Ireland, we prided ourselves on having excellent primary and second-level schools. But Covid-19 has shone a light on the growing inequities in our system. Research before, during and after the pandemic has shown persistent inequalities, as wealthier families compensate for underinvestment through fundraising and paying for out-of-school supports. Underfunding of our schools impacts most on poor and working-class students and those with additional needs.

Investment in education benefits every aspect of society, reducing inequalities and building strong foundations for future social and economic development. Instead of cutting taxes we need to invest now in our children and in our future.



2) Fund school patronage transfers

- **Budget 2024**: Invest 5.9 million* to kick-start the Government's reconfiguration programme

Education continues to be dominated by patrons with a religious ethos, with 90% of primary schools under Catholic patronage. The government has pledged to increase the number of multi-denominational schools to 400 by the year 2030. Parents have been seeking this change for decades, yet the Department of Education's reconfiguration programme, which aims to identify religious-run schools that could transfer to multi-denominational patronage, has no dedicated programme budget, nor roadmap, or interim targets.

Lack of resources for change is a key reason for lack of progress in school transfers to date and it is clear now that reforms will not happen without strategic investment to support and incentivise change. In 2022, Northern Ireland invested an additional £1.9m to support schools through the transformation process as they work towards integrated status. This investment will respond to parental demand in Northern Ireland and enable a greater number of children from different community backgrounds to be educated together.

Instead of paying continued lip service to reconfiguration, the government must properly fund a programme of change. It is beyond time for annual ring-fenced funding to be put in place for the Department of Education to support the amalgamation and reconfiguration of existing facilities so that all families can finally access schools that match their conscience and lawful preference. Ring-fenced capital funding is also required for the building of new schools where this is required.

It is time for a clear strategy and a concrete, funded plan, so that families seeking equality-based schooling options can do so. Funding is needed to both reform and progress the reconfiguration process, including funding for:

- Supporting and resourcing school patrons through new patron grants to support each patronage change process at school level (change management process, amalgamations where required, staffing changes, enrolment changes, teacher CPD, rebranding, etc).
- Canvassing the views of all parents in a school planning area, including pre-school parents, as well as parents of primary-age children who currently travel outside the area to access equality-based or multi-denominational education.



2) Fund school patronage transfers (continued)

- Appointing an independent advisory group made up of all patron bodies as well as parent groups to oversee and support reconfiguration of school provision.
- Holding a nationwide confidential survey of parents, run by an impartial state agency. We would then, for the first time, know the true profile of parental demand for schools of different types and the Government could allocate school places and resources fairly.
- Forming an impartial state agency dedicated to overseeing school transfers to state and voluntary patrons.
- Funding high quality impartial consultation at community level along the lines of the 'Community Conversations' approach utilised in Northern Ireland.
- Researching and learning from the process of change established in Northern Ireland, whereby a clearly set-out process for school transfers is in place. This process is transparent and can be triggered either by school governors or by a petition signed by 20% of parents in a school community.
- Appointing a Development Officer in potential transfer patron organisations (Educate Together, ETBs, An Foras Pátrúnachta) to identify and support communities where change is needed and to provide information and support to school communities wishing to transfer patronage.
- Raising awareness about the possibility of patronage transfer patronage via advertising, information and community supports.
- Establishing new Educate Together schools in all 12 towns where demand for such schools has already been objectively proven through the divestment process should be sanctioned as a priority (Arklow, Clonmel, Cobh, Dungarvan, Kells, Killarney, Loughrea, Nenagh, Palmerstown, Passage West, Shannon and Whitehall) and funding should in place to support this initiative.

*A strategy and plan must be funded in the first instance and actual costs will be based on the actions in that plan. This figure is based on the additional figure invested in integrated education in Northern Ireland this year, adjusted pro-rata per head of population.



3) Fund primary schools

- Maintain the primary school capitation grant at €258 per pupil, as announced in Budget 2023, and make this a permanent feature in future budgets

Research has shown that state grants only meet around half of the costs of running a primary school, leaving parents to foot the rest of the bill. This leads to huge inequalities, with some school communities able to fund the gap and others left behind. The introduction of free books in 2023 is a welcome step, providing some relief for families. However, it does nothing to help schools pay their bills.

As part of a package of cost of living measures introduced in Budget 2023, the government provided once-off additional funding to support increased running costs for primary and second-level schools to assist them dealing with challenges faced in relation to rising energy and other costs. This additional grant was paid at the rate of €75 per pupil at primary level, bringing the grant from €183 per pupil in 2022 to €258 in 2023.

With continued increases in utility, insurance and other costs, primary schools will again face significant funding challenges this coming September. Families continue to face costs-of-living increases and can no longer plug the gap. This is coupled with more than a decade of underfunding of this crucial stage of children's education in Ireland. The school capitation grant of €258 per pupil paid in 2023 needs to be maintained and made permanent, simply to enable primary schools to pay their bills in the coming school year.



4) Support voluntary initiative by restoring funding for voluntary management bodies

- **Increase management body grants by 50%**

Volunteers who manage our schools bring huge added value, grounding schools in their communities and saving the state millions. Our education system is significantly enhanced by the skills, time and initiative of more than 22,000 volunteers on primary school boards of management alone. These volunteers deserve professional supports and recognition.

The voluntary management bodies that support these volunteers operate on a fraction of the costs of their state counterparts, as well as bringing significant educational value to the system. The grants paid to management bodies to advise and support primary school boards of management have not been increased since 2006, while the costs involved in supporting school management have risen sharply, as the legal, HR and governance requirements have increased. Because of their lean structures, a small investment in voluntary management bodies goes a long way; increasing management body grants by 50% would represent a tiny cost to the state, but would have a huge positive impact on the thousands of volunteers that manage our voluntary schools.

As a management body for 96 primary schools, Educate Together receives a total core grant of €133,000, reduced in 2006 from €144,000. Since then the number of boards of management we support has more than doubled, and the demands of boards and of the DE and other statutory bodies, as well as costs, have increased. The volunteers who manage our schools need more support, not less, and a review of this grant is long overdue.



5) Invest in inclusion

- **Provide one-off funding to develop a comprehensive plan to re-balance school provision**
- **Ensure sufficient multi-annual funding to implement the plan**

Educate Together believes that every child should have access to an inclusive education in their local area, no matter what their background or educational needs, and we have been working towards this future for more than 45 years. Current policy to move towards greater inclusion system-wide is to be welcomed, However, aspirations must be met with planning and strategic investment if inclusion is to be achieved.

The current situation is unacceptable: poor planning has left our system out-of-step with the needs of children and young people. Families of autistic children and others disabled by our system face impossible challenges in accessing assessments, therapeutic services and even school places. English as an additional language provision is insufficiently supported, and children from migrant and refugee backgrounds are currently without crucial translation, interpretation and mother tongue services.

Schools that welcome students with additional needs are left without the funding and supports they need to provide an appropriate education and research also shows that teachers still lack confidence in meeting the needs of children with additional needs and those from migrant backgrounds.

These challenges are exacerbated in developing schools, which cater for large numbers of children with additional needs, and are relatively understaffed because of issues with current staffing models. All of this impacts negatively on all students.

- The following are required to get us onto the right path:
 - A comprehensive strategy and plan to re-balance AEN provision so that every child can access both a suitable school place and necessary services in their local area.
 - Multi-annual funding to implement the plan, including:
 - immediate allocation of additional teacher, assistant and management posts in developing schools where they are urgently needed
 - increased funding for assessments, therapeutic and language supports, and funding of structures to coordinate provision across schools, the HSE and other bodies
 - increased investment in teacher education to build greater confidence and capacity in inclusion across early years, primary and second-level education.



6) Pilot Nurture Schools

- **Establish a national pilot to demonstrate the positive outcome of the Nurture approach for students across Ireland**
- **Provide schools with access to CPD, staffing and resources to implement a Nurture approach**

The covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted us all. In education, children and young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and those from families with less social and economic capital at risk of educational disadvantage are among those worst affected.

From work done in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, we know the Nurture approach goes a long way to addressing some of these difficulties. Educate Together's Nurture School project 2020 - 2023 has shown that this intervention also works here: students' relationships with school staff and peers improve and engagement with school and learning increases - and once these things improve so too do their educational outcomes.

Educate Together is currently supporting a third of our network (35 primary and post-primary schools) to adopt the Nurture approach; an evidence-based intervention that tackles barriers to students learning. A recent evaluation confirms that this is a low-cost, highly effective intervention that reaches students at greatest risk.

Modest investment in a pilot programme would enable the Department of Education to extend this successful approach to other schools, reaching students who need this support, preventing disengagement, underachievement and school drop-out.



Conclusion

Our education system has remained chronically underfunded for too long. Education initiatives and education budgets must be supported and resourced so that every child and young person can access an inclusive and quality education in their local area, no matter what their background or educational needs. The above proposals represent the minimum required to properly address the challenges faced in the Irish education system, so that we can support every child and young person to reach their full potential and build a strong, cohesive and prosperous society.



Further information:

Luke O'Shaughnessy, Communications Manager

info@educatetogether.ie

www.educatetogether.ie

01 429 2500

Company Number 286202

Registered Charity Number 20033309



Educate
Together