

Submission to the National Convention on Education on behalf of the voluntary primary management bodies – February 2026

Introduction

The National Convention on Education offers a timely opportunity to reflect on the strengths of Irish education and to identify the changes needed to futureproof our system and ensure that every child can succeed in a rapidly-changing world.

Together the six voluntary primary management bodies represent the entire diversity of the primary sector: small and large, urban and rural, denominational and multi-denominational schools, Gaelscoileanna, special schools, and a wide range of socio-economic and cultural diversity. At the core of the sector are committed volunteer board members who give their time and expertise to the governance of their local schools, united by a shared commitment to children's education and wellbeing.

The distinctive value of voluntary governance in Irish education

Primary schools are at the heart of their communities - hubs where families connect and where social cohesion is strengthened. Boards of management include parent, teacher, patron and community nominees and because voluntary boards are locally embedded, schools can respond quickly to emerging needs - welcoming newly-arrived families, establishing autism classes for local children, or supporting families in crisis. This responsiveness is possible because governance is close to the community rather than centrally administered.

The range of school types provided by voluntary bodies supports choice and diversity within the primary system. While all schools follow the same national curriculum and meet the same legal and governance requirements, families can choose between different school models, including Irish-medium schools and schools with religious or non-religious patronage. This diversity is a strength - it provides autonomy, creativity and innovation. Under our Constitution, parents have a right to choose the type of school their children attend. Voluntary patrons and management bodies provide different options for families while maintaining consistent national standards.

As voluntary management bodies who support and represent almost all of our 3,000 primary schools, we provide training and support services that are essential to Ireland's education system. Our schools are governed locally by volunteers rather than being managed by state Education and Training Boards, and voluntary bodies appoint, train and support these boards at a fraction of the cost of state structures.

Many thousands of volunteers serve on primary school boards nationwide, contributing time, expertise and leadership and maintaining strong community links. They oversee finances, monitor progress and safeguard the wellbeing of pupils and staff. This local accountability strengthens trust and reduces the need for substantial state expenditure, as governance functions that would otherwise have to be executed by state employees are carried out voluntarily by dedicated community members.

Resourcing our primary schools – a fair chance for all

Article 42.4 of the Constitution requires the state to provide for free primary education. However, this commitment has never been fully realised. In 2024, the average annual expenditure per student across the continuum of education in Ireland was €11,067 compared to an average of €12,041 in OECD countries. At

primary level this figure drops to €9,287 per pupil¹. Primary school capitation funding has consistently fallen short of what is required to meet basic running costs, increasing inequalities between schools and limiting what many schools can offer pupils.

In this context primary schools continue to struggle to pay their bills, and families face additional charges to cover everyday school expenses. This long-standing gap has never been addressed at national level and Ireland remains an outlier in relying so heavily on local fundraising to sustain core school operations.

Compounding this underfunding, there is a disparity between sectors, with voluntary schools operating with lower levels of support than their counterparts in state schools. In ETB schools costs such as insurance, information systems, IT and other services are managed centrally by state-funded employees. In the voluntary sector, these responsibilities rest with individual schools and their boards, who continue to have minimal administration support and less purchasing power.

Grant funding for the voluntary management bodies that support 99% of primary school boards has been frozen now for almost two decades – in fact it has been cut, taking inflation into account. Over that period, the complexity of school governance and the support needs of boards have increased significantly. While funding to ETBs has risen dramatically, voluntary management bodies have not been supported to evolve at the same pace.

The impact is felt directly by school communities. Schools are forced to ask parents to contribute towards costs that should properly be covered by the State, and Boards of Management must devote time and energy to management tasks which should be carried out by state-paid school staff. Ultimately children and young people receive different levels of resourcing and support depending on the type of school they attend – an intolerable situation in a system that claims to value every child equally.

We believe this Convention must explore how school funding structures can be reformed to reflect the true cost of delivering education, ensuring that core expenses of all schools and management bodies are met by the state, so that our valued education professionals can focus on teaching and learning, rather than fundraising.

Far from being a historical inheritance, voluntary management remains a dynamic and adaptive governance model suited to a modern, diverse Ireland. The Convention should explore how to support this model to continue to develop into the future.

Conclusion

Ireland's education system has achieved high participation, strong community trust, and social stability through a partnership between the State and voluntary initiative, despite chronic underfunding. Voluntary school management has enabled Ireland to accommodate religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity within a single, publicly funded system, and the volunteers who manage our schools deserve support as we look to the future. The Convention offers an opportunity to explore ways to address funding inequities and resourcing gaps, and to reaffirm and modernise this partnership for the next generation.

Submitted on behalf of:

- An Foras Pátrúnachta
- Catholic Primary School Management Association

¹ https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/09/education-at-a-glance-2024-country-notes_532eb29d/ireland_6f2e6652/962b6c53-en.pdf

- Church of Ireland Board of Education
- Educate Together
- Muslim Primary Board of Education
- National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education