



CPSMA Pre-Budget Submission Budget 2021



Catholic Primary Schools Management Association

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About CPSMA

CPSMA (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association) is a recognised school management organisation. It advocates on behalf of the boards of management of over 2,800 Catholic primary schools and approximately 50 associate member schools.

Since the first COVID-19 school closure, CPSMA has been heavily engaged with the Department of Education on COVID-19 planning as well as its usual interactions with the Department. During this time CPSMA has also handled over 15,000 phone calls from the principals and chairpersons in approximately 2450 schools. We have also created webinars on the agreed Board of Management training modules and nine additional webinars related to COVID-19. We have also begun podcasting on topical matters relating to school management in general.





Introduction

For Irish primary education, the academic year 2020/21 was unique. The system, already underfunded, overcrowded and overstretched, proved incredibly resilient in the face of a global pandemic. It came down to the quality, effort and commitment of the people who lead, manage, teach and staff our schools. All the members of the school communities rose to the challenge of reopening schools and keeping them open through the most difficult of circumstances.

They did so, not because of government policy, or because keeping schools open was essential to keeping the Irish economy alive, but because they know and understand the value of teaching and learning in school for children's education. As one principal remarked after months of distance teaching and learning, "one hour in the classroom is worth a week of Zoom". At its best, online education is a poor substitute for face to face learning but for vulnerable children, or children from disadvantaged communities, often with less access to digital devices and broadband, it is no substitute at all.

Principals, in particular, worked tirelessly to ensure that schools could reopen safely. They created and implemented policies, protocols and procedures to help keep their school communities safe from a novel silent, infectious contagion, often ahead of official guidance. They had to deal with product recalls, emergency arrangements for extending the school meals scheme, contact tracing, temporary school closures, local surges and dealing with worried parents, pupils and staff.

If there was one bright spot in all of this gloom, it was the recognition of the vital work of teachers as educators of our children and how challenging a job it is. This became very apparent for parents and guardians who had to home school their children during the initial lockdown period.

While the system has coped in the short term, the underlying problems in Irish primary education remain to be addressed.

We have the largest class sizes in Europe and yet we spend less per pupil than the European Union or Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average. Even before COVID-19, primary school principals were on average working 50+ hours and 60% reported poor psychological well-being due to workload and stress.

Voluntary boards of management, principals, teachers and all other school staff have met every challenge, worked incredibly hard and demonstrated extraordinary commitment to the pupils in their care. They deserve a clear commitment from Government and society that once this pandemic is over we will see real investment to address the chronic underfunding and under-resourcing of primary education. Investment to reduce class sizes. Investment so that school communities are not dependent on voluntary contributions to provide basic requirements, such as heat and light, in schools. Investment in proper administrative supports so principals can focus on leading teaching and learning, rather than fundraising and firefighting.

Addressing the Challenges in Primary Education

This Budget is an opportunity for Government to translate rhetoric into resources and to acknowledge the sacrifices and hard work of schools communities across the country by investing in education.

The Government is to be commended for the extra resources it provided for the schools system during the COVID-19 pandemic such as the roll out of supply panels, one administration day a week for teaching principals and extra resources for cleaning and remedial works. These were essential to assist schools to cope with the COVID-19 challenge. It is obvious from their success that some of these initiatives, such as the supply panels and increased principal release days should be continued in a post pandemic environment.

The following recommendations are, we believe, the minimum that Government needs to do to begin to address the challenges in primary education.

CPSMA submits that

1

The successful supply panels initiative be rolled out to all primary schools, the administrative day a week for teaching principals be retained and the substitute cover for brief absences extended permanently

2

Capitation grant funding be raised to at least 2010 levels as a priority for Budget 2021, with a schedule of increases provided for on an annual basis thereafter, and furthermore, that all financial costs incurred by schools in fulfilment of their FFSU obligations be covered by the Department of Education directly

3

Leadership and management posts be immediately restored to pre-moratorium levels

4

Funding be made available to fully resource the new school inclusion model to ensure the full inclusion of children with special education needs in education.





Teacher Supply Panels and Staff Substitution Cover

Supply panels

CPSMA welcomed and supported the expansion of the supply panel scheme, designed to ensure availability of qualified, registered substitute teachers to provide cover for short-term teacher absences. CPSMA calls for the further expansion of this scheme on a national basis to ensure that all schools have access to the supply panel scheme. CPSMA also calls on the Department to ensure that all Gaelscoileanna are able to avail of the extended supply panel scheme.

Substitution cover

CPSMA notes the importance and necessity of substitute cover for teacher absences and calls on the Department to provide substitute cover for all teacher absences, as provided for in Information Note 0018/2021, on a permanent basis.

School Funding

Capitation grant

The five percent increase in the capitation grant in the 2018 budget was welcome but was totally inadequate. An increase of €8.50 per pupil per year has a very small impact on the funding shortfall which forces schools to fundraise approximately €46m a year from parents.

In theory, primary school education in Ireland is free. The Constitution is unambiguous as Article 42.4. states;

“The State shall provide for free primary education...”

In practice, however, new research from Grant Thornton (February, 2018) shows that the capitation grant which is meant to pay for the day to day running costs of schools and the provision of educational materials, on average covers just over half of school running costs. Already hard-pressed parents are contributing over €46m a year to keep schools solvent, the lights on, water in the taps and heating oil in the tank, not to mention educational materials.

For some time, CPSMA had been aware of growing complaints amongst principals and boards of management that the capitation grant was not covering the core costs of running a school. Therefore, CPSMA requested Grant Thornton to undertake an analysis of the financial accounts of a representative sample (5%) of Catholic Primary Schools for the years 2015 and 2016.

Based on the figures contained in the sample accounts CPSMA requested Grant Thornton to provide an estimate of the total contribution of parents and local communities to local schools. Grant Thornton estimated the total contribution at over €46m (€46,572,352). Legislative changes, such as GDPR, will impose further costs on schools for the secure retention of data and the responding to data access requests.

As a long-term strategy for funding primary school education, the current model is unsustainable. This matter is now urgent as many schools have exhausted limited contingency funds and many are running deficits.

Therefore, CPSMA requests that the Department of Education identifies the raising of capitation grant funding to at least 2010 levels as a priority for Budget 2021 and to provide a schedule of increases thereafter so as to meet the real running costs of primary schools.

Financial School Support Unit compliance

CPSMA estimates that compliance with all of the guidance from the Financial School Support Unit (FSSU) costs schools approximately €17m a year. Schools are now in the invidious position of fundraising to pay for accountants to account for the money schools raise. CPSMA calls on the Department of Education to directly pay for the cost of compliance with FSSU guidance.

School Leadership and Management

Principal release days

CPSMA welcomed the Department of Education's continuation of the allocation of teaching principal release time to 37 days per year, as well as the continuation of the principal release cluster post scheme for the 2020/21 school year, which allows for schools to formally cluster their principal release days to ensure continuity of substitute cover.

Teaching principals perform a dual role in their schools – a full-time teacher and principal. These release days are required to allow teaching principals to undertake key leadership and management roles within their schools. CPSMA believes that the Department must provide for these days on a permanent basis to continue to support teaching principals in the management of their workload.

Leadership and management posts

CPSMA welcomed the partial restoration of Leadership and Management Posts (formerly Posts of Responsibility) in primary school provided for by Circular 0063/2017. However, given the continual workload increases placed upon school principals, leadership teams and boards of management, we call for the immediate restoration of Leadership and Management posts to pre-moratorium levels (Circular 0007/2003).

Initiative overload

CPSMA believes that the Department must examine the issue of initiative overload in schools and the role which this has played in significantly increasing the administrative workload on even the smallest of schools. CPSMA look forward to constructively engaging with the Department on this issue through the Primary Forum and recognise that it is of common concern.

Special Education Needs

CPSMA submits that the Department ensures full and comprehensive investment in special education at primary level. Funding must be made available to fully resource the new school inclusion model to ensure the full inclusion of children with special education needs in education. Such funding must ensure that the New Model of Special Education and pilot being run at present are equitably resourced and implemented.

Further to this, CPSMA submits that administrative principal status be automatically conferred on all schools having a special class attached.



Conclusion

Primary education has remained underfunded and undervalued by successive governments. CPSMA submits that primary education be prioritised to ensure that society in general will ultimately benefit from the best educational outcomes for our young people. The above proposals represent the minimum needed to address the challenges facing primary education.

