

Primary schools cutting learning resources to cover rising costs



Just more than half of schools indicated they had to fundraise to cover basic utilities.
Photograph: iStock

Most primary schools say they have run deficits over the past year and have to rely on cash reserves to cover basic running costs, according to a new survey.

The poll of 1,440 schools – almost half of all primary schools – was carried out last month by the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), which supports about 85 per cent of all primary schools across the State.

It found more than 70 per cent of schools have run at a deficit over the past 12 months due to rising costs and a shortfall in grant funding to cover expenses such as light, heat and transport.

Schools say they are being forced to take a range of cost-saving measures to get by, such as reducing expenditure on school tours, delaying fire safety checks or dropping school alarm monitoring subscriptions.

Others say they have had to either reintroduce or increase voluntary contributions from parents.

When asked about running costs, schools highlighted significant cost increases in utilities and essential items over the past two years with heating costs, on average, up 37 per cent, electricity up 35 per cent and insurance up 19 per cent.

Just more than half of schools indicated they had to fundraise to cover basic utilities.

One principal commented in the survey: “Teaching and learning resources are not being bought in order that basic running costs are paid for ... It makes no sense that on one hand parents are gratefully receiving free books and free hot lunches for their children, and on the other hand the school community has no choice but to ask the parents to contribute.”

A large proportion of schools also said increases in the cost of classroom resources, stationery and photocopying meant teaching and learning resources were not being bought, or cut back on.

[[‘The bill landed like a hand grenade’: Principals face tough choices to avoid schools going into deficits](#)]

Seamus Mulconry, general secretary of the CPSMA, said the [cost-of-living crisis](#) was “crucifying” schools.

“Inflation has more than eaten away all benefits of last years increase in capitation. In fact schools are burning through their reserves just to pay for everyday expenses,” Mr Mulconry said.

“We need either an injection of cash in the system now or a strong reassurance that funds are on the way in September.”

The [Department of Education](#) said it secured the highest ever funding package for primary and post-primary schools this year.

The funding included targeted resources for school communities with an increase in capitation of more than €81 million. This, it said, will bring the basic rate of capitation funding to €200 per student in primary schools and to €345 in voluntary secondary schools.

The funding also included additional capitation to recognise the rising cost of living which was paid in two instalments to schools, in October 2023 and in early 2024 respectively.

The department said any possible further increases will be part of Budget 2025 negotiations.

“While not wishing to pre-empt the outcomes of any future budget negotiations or fiscal parameters agreed by Government, the Department of Education will continue to seek and prioritise the additional funding required to meet the ongoing costs of running schools as part of the annual estimates process,” the department said.

Any schools in difficulty have been advised to contact the Financial Support Services Unit, which is funded by the department and offers advice and support to schools on financial matters.

The CPSMA carried out the online survey of its member schools in May, investigating the financial situation of schools in 2024. It said the 1,440 schools who responded provide a representative sample of primary schools.

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- **‘The bill landed like a hand grenade’: Principals face tough choices to avoid schools going into deficits**



- Máire Marnell, principal of Scoil Mhuire, Ballyboden, Dublin. Photograph Nick Bradshaw
- The gas bill, says primary school principal Máire Marnell, landed like a hand grenade.

- “I almost had a heart attack – it was €10,000,” says Marnell. “I thought, ‘Oh my God, we just can’t afford it. This is going to be really, really bad.’”
- Marnell got straight into her car and went down to her local AIB, where she pleaded for the gas bill payment to be stopped from leaving the school bank account.
- Otherwise, she worried that the school – Scoil Mhuire in Ballyboden, [Dublin 16](#) – would go into the red and school staff would go unpaid.
- She later agreed an eight-month payment plan with utility provider [Bord Gáis](#) to ensure the school did not go into the red.
- *[[Most primary schools running deficits amid rising costs, survey finds](#)]*
- “That’s just the gas bill,” Marnell says. “We’ve electricity bills, insurance bills and we’re splitting them up because we don’t want to hit rock bottom. We need to pay people’s wages – taxi escorts [for special needs pupils], cleaners, everyone. They are my priority.”
- Marnell’s experience is not uncommon. In fact, most primary schools say they have run deficits over the past year and have to rely on cash reserves to cover basic running costs, [according to a new survey](#).
- The poll of 1,440 schools was carried out last month by the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), which supports about 85 per cent of all primary schools across the State.
- It found more than 70 per cent of schools have run at a deficit over the past 12 months due to rising costs and a shortfall in grant funding to cover expenses such as light, heat and transport.
- Schools say they are being forced to take a range of cost-saving measures, including reducing expenditure on school tours, delaying fire safety checks and dropping school alarm monitoring subscriptions.



- Máire Marnell, principal of Scoil Mhuire, Ballyboden, Dublin. Photograph Nick Bradshaw
- In theory, schools get enough funding from the State to get by. It comes in the form of two per-capita grants, with the level of funding dependent on pupil enrolment.
- The capitation grant is supposed to cater for day-to-day running costs such as heating, lighting, cleaning, insurance and general up-keep, while the ancillary grant is to cater for the cost of employing ancillary services staff.
- In reality, many schools have for years relied on fundraisers and parents' voluntary contributions to bridge the funding gap.
- According to the Department of Education, it has secured the highest ever funding package for primary and post-primary schools this year.
- This includes increased capitation rates for schools in recognition of the rising costs of heating and lighting over recent years.
- *There are kids here who can't afford the basics. Schools shouldn't have to struggle like this*
- Schools, however, say the cost increases go beyond utilities and argue everything from transport to cleaning to general upkeep has also jumped.
- Meanwhile, seeking parents' voluntary contributions to help with school finances is not an option for all schools.
- Scoil Mhuire in Ballyboden – categorised as disadvantaged – does not seek voluntary contributions from parents to make up the shortfalls.

School staff organise fundraisers and seek sponsorship just to cover the basics.

- “People here give what they can and are incredibly generous, but you can’t ask for big money, so we do our best to balance things out,” says Marnell. “We don’t have fancy equipment or sensory rooms ... we hold off on things like cutting hedges. Our caretaker, for example, went out and bought a second-hand ride-on lawnmower on DoneDeal for €850, to save the cost of hiring outside people to cut the grass for €500.”
- Running the school has been an eye opener into the precarious state of school finances for Marnell, who took over as principal two years ago.
- While increased Department of Education funding for rising costs such as heat and light is welcome, she says, increases in other costs are not accounted for.
- “I don’t want to sound like a complete moan – I love the role, I love the job. I skip in here each day. We have an amazing school, 50 years old almost, right in the heart of the local community. We’re right in the centre of things. We welcome everyone: we have three autism classes, we’ve international protection children, Travellers, an influx of Indian children. We love them all,” she says.
- “It’s not a level playing field when it comes to finance. Other schools can get voluntary contributions and afford equipment ... there are kids here who can’t afford the basics. Schools shouldn’t have to struggle like this.”
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- **Primary schools facing funding deficits as running costs rise**

- [Emma O Kelly](#)



- More than half of those who responded to the survey said their schools had to fundraise to pay for basic utilities (File image)
- Seven out of ten primary schools have run at a deficit at some stage over the past 12 months and had to rely on cash reserves to cover day-to-day costs due to insufficient core funding from the State, according to a survey carried out by the Catholic Primary School Management Association.
- The online survey was conducted over ten days last month and 1,440 schools, or approximately 50% of all Catholic primary schools, responded.
- The CPSMA said the survey results present "a sobering snapshot of the challenging financial situation" facing primary schools here.
- Schools reported that their heating costs have risen by an average of 37% over the course of the past two years. Electricity costs increased by an average of 35%, and insurance costs by 19% on average during the same period.
- More than half of all those who responded said their schools had to fundraise to pay for basic utilities.
- Schools also reported other cost increases with one in five citing increased school transport costs. "This significant increase in cost has resulted in schools having to limit educational experiences for pupils," the CPSMA said.
- Schools also reported having to pass increased costs onto parents.

- Other significant cost increases include classroom resources, stationery and photocopying, with more than one in five schools complaining of price rises in these areas.
- The survey found that 21% also indicated a significant increase in the cost of cleaning materials and the cost of hiring contract cleaners over the past two years, noting that the cost had increased during the Covid-19 pandemic and had not returned to pre-pandemic levels.
- The CPSMA also said its survey highlights significant financial issues related to the State grant that schools are given out of which staff such as caretakers, secretaries and cleaners are paid. This is called the ancillary grant.
- Almost three quarters of schools that responded said they would not have enough money to pay their ancillary staff this year, with the average deficit between grant paid and monies required being €7,166.
- "Schools have indicated that they are under huge strain to attempt to honour ancillary staff wages," the CPSMA said.
- As well as criticising the inadequacy of current levels of funding, school principals who participated in the survey said they were unable to budget due to a lack of clarity around when and if some grants would be paid.
- The survey invited comments from school principals and the CPSMA said the responses received highlight the stress that financial uncertainty is causing school managers.
- "The survey has highlighted many principals feeling burned out and dissatisfied with their role due to the financial constraints being placed upon them by inadequate funding, with some reporting considering leaving the role of principal due to the stress and worry associated with money," the organisation said.
- The report contains quotes from anonymous school principals with one stating: "Waiting for grants and not knowing when they will come in is exhausting and stressful. I intend leaving the role this year and one of the major factors is the stress of trying to spread so little money across the school service."
- **'Fumes are running out' for schools**
- The General Secretary of the CPSMA has called for more supports for primary schools in Budget 2025.
- Speaking on RTÉ News at One, Seamus Mulconry said: "There isn't enough money in the system to pay for the basic running costs, we need an injection of cash immediately or a very solid reassurance to schools that sufficient funds will be made available in the next budget, and early on in the school year."
- Mr Mulconry added that schools have no choice but to fundraise, saying that they "have been running on fumes for too long, and the fumes are running out."

