

CPSMA Submission

to

Joint Committee on Education & Social Protection on rising costs faced by parents

1.00. Submitting Party

1.01. The Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) is a recognised school management organisation. It represents the boards of management of in excess of 2,900 primary schools in Ireland. It provides a wide range of services to its members including advising on a multiplicity of issues, the provision of a website that is constantly updated, the publication of a regular Newsletter, issuing a Handbook, training on issues of relevance etc.

2.00. Executive Summary

CPSMA's submission deals with the following issues:-

- 2.01.** Funding of primary schools and the legal requirements to make provision for education.
- 2.02.** The current inadequacy of funding provision: There is a direct correlation between the funding of schools and the costs borne by parents. Many schools are chronically underfunded and cannot introduce means of reducing costs to parents e.g. book rental schemes. The ongoing cuts are impacting significantly on schools that have a dual problem to contend with, cash flow difficulties and inability to pay bills.
- 2.03.** Additional charges on schools: Schools are treated like businesses and must pay standing charges. However they cannot avail of the advantages that businesses enjoy e.g. VAT cannot be offset against purchases.
- 2.04.** Some of the major costs facing parents and the timing of same have been identified.
- 2.05.** CPSMA conducted a survey of its members in order to ascertain practical ways that schools alleviate costs.
- 2.06.** Voluntary contributions: Schools seek voluntary contributions from parents in order to pay for day to day school running costs.
- 2.07.** CPSMA has engaged with the National Procurement Service (NPS) which has resulted in significant savings in electricity costs for schools. This is being rolled out to cover other costs and could be further expanded.

3.00. The legal basis for the funding of primary schools

- 3.01.** Article 42.4 of Bunreacht na hÉireann states that the State shall provide for free primary education.
- 3.02.** The provision for education was given statutory recognition in the 1998 Education Act the Preamble of which specifically recognises that the Act is to *inter alia* "... provide for the recognition and funding of schools". In section 7 the Act stipulates *inter alia* that it is a function of the Minister to provide funding to each recognised school. Section 12 provides that the Minister is required to determine and publish in each school year criteria by which recognised schools are to be funded in the following school year from monies provided by the Oireachtas. Section 15 requires boards of management to have regard to the efficient use of resources and in particular the efficient use of grants provided.

4.00. Funding for primary schools

- 4.01.** The funding of primary schools has been based primarily on a capitation grant payable each year. The capitation grants from the Department of Education and Skills are based on the numbers of pupils enrolled on the 30th of the previous September i.e. for this academic year (2012/2013) a school's grant is based on the number of pupils on the roll on 30th September 2011.
- 4.02.** The grant is paid in two moieties, 70% in February and 30% in the succeeding June. The latter moiety of 30% is adjusted to take account of enrolment of the current academic year i.e. September 2012. No school receives a capitation grant for less than that applicable to a 60 pupil enrolment situation.
- 4.03.** For the school year 2009/2010 the capitation grant per pupil was €200. This has now been reduced by €22 to €178 per pupil with further cuts envisaged. Cuts have also been made to the grant for children with special educational needs. In the case of a school with 100 mainstream pupils and five pupils with special educational needs this is a loss of €2,715. Schools must now survive on less than a euro a day per pupil.
- 4.04.** Even in the so called good times schools had to rely on other grants to meet day to day maintenance costs. The minor works grant was paid annually to schools and was used for ongoing maintenance issues such as replacing panes of glass, windows & roof repairs, re-painting and re-decorating etc. Crucially it was a source of funding to cash starved schools in November/December when the capitation grant had long since been exhausted. It enabled schools to stay afloat until the next tranche of capitation payment was received the following February. It is perhaps not understood that many schools are experiencing serious cash flow issues as they have to survive from June of the previous school year to February without any significant cash injection. The minor works grant was paid at a flat rate of €5,500 with a top up of €18.50 per mainstream pupil and €74 for pupils with special educational needs. Thus a school with 100 mainstream pupils and five pupils with special education needs received a grant of €7,720. In a communication to schools the Department of Education & Skills has stated that this grant is unlikely to apply in the current school year. CPSMA has been inundated with calls from schools regarding the dire financial situation that the removal of this grant places them in.
- 4.05.** When the reduction in the capitation grant and the removal of the minor works grant are combined this means that a school with 100 mainstream pupils and five pupils with special education needs is down a staggering €10,435 in funding. Some schools have asked CPSMA to advise what happens if the school cannot pay its bills whereas others have indicated that they cannot turn on the heating due to the cost of same.

5.00. Additional Charges on schools

- 5.01.** Schools are treated as businesses in regard to the purchase of gas, oil, electricity etc. for example. Almost one third of utility bills can be attributable to standing charges which arise even when schools are shut for holiday periods. An Post also charges schools to retain post during the summer months even though schools are not allowed to collect the post.
- 5.02.** Water rates have also placed enormous burdens on many schools.
- 5.03.** Schools must also pay the usual bills that businesses encounter e.g. bin charges, cleaning materials, office materials, photocopying, bus hire, insurance, the annual fire certificate costs which can run into thousands of euros, not to mention the costs of monitored alarms etc.
- 5.04.** Even though schools have to pay VAT they cannot offset same against purchases.
- 5.05.** Against the above backdrop schools find themselves in a very difficult situation. They are faced with few choices other than to try to source monies elsewhere e.g. by

asking parents to pay voluntary contributions so that essential bills e.g. heat and light can be paid. Schools are extremely conscious of the effect that this has on already hard pressed parents. The alternative of engaging in fundraising events again targets the same audience i.e. parents.

6.00. Costs facing Parents on return to school

6.01. CPSMA conducted a survey of its members regarding the costs faced by parents on return to school in September. This survey is a snap shot in time. Uniforms and books were identified as two significant items of expenditure.

6.02. Uniforms: The Back to School Clothing and Footwear scheme is to assist families on social welfare. The HSE makes payments towards the cost of uniforms and footwear for children who are attending school. The scheme operates from 1st June to 30th September and eligibility is subject to certain conditions and a means test. There are two rates of payment which are age related. The 2012 rates are €150 for each child aged 4-11 on or before 30th September 2012 & €250 for each child aged 12-22 on or before 30th September 2012. The different rates which are age dependent highlight a further issue for primary schools i.e. the differentiation in payments regarding primary and other education sectors.

6.03. The CPSMA survey highlighted some difficulties in regard to the usage of this assistance package for parents. One school made the following comment: *“Many of our parents who get the clothing and footwear allowance do not spend it for that purpose. If this allowance was paid in the form of goods, even if more awkward to administer, at least it would get to the children for whom it was intended. I know of a parent telling me that she had to use it to pay the ESB or she would have been cut off. Another observation was that it is sometimes forgotten that the outlay cost in September may cover the cost of dressing the child for 183 days and that sometimes cheaper uniforms may not last the whole year and parents may end up buying again later in the year. Another suggestion made was that if parents had a system where they could pay a few euros into a savings scheme all year long they could have credit in September.*

6.04. The survey also highlighted methods of addressing the costs of uniforms:-

- *Ensure that the school crest can be bought separately so that uniforms can be bought in chain stores and not just in specialist shops. School crests could be sewn/ironed on*
- *Second hand uniform sales could be arranged before the end of the previous school year*
- *Uniforms can be passed on to siblings, children of family relatives and to children of family friends*
- *A uniform recycling scheme where parents donate outgrown clean school uniforms and parents can take them as needed.*
- *Let children wear runners rather than shoes, as one pair is expensive enough.*

6.05. In response to the suggestion of not having a uniform it was pointed out that while this concept may be attractive for children, it could also be counterproductive and work out very expensive not just in monetary terms for parents. Pupils come under peer pressure and parents are very often unable to withstand this pressure in their already fraught lives to buy brand names, as one principal commented: *“I have a parent in the office telling me that she spent the night up, after the children had gone to bed sewing the labels saved from brand names on to the cheaper models of clothes to ensure the child would have the correct clothes in school”* Other comments received were as follows: *I find in the long term the uniform and tracksuit are a huge saving, Parents should realise that a uniform is a considerably less expensive option to regular clothing over a year.*

- 6.06.** Another suggestion offered was that schools specify non branded school bags, lunchboxes etc to prevent competition.
- 6.07.** Book Costs: This is undoubtedly a very significant cost for parents. The most frequent suggestion was the use of a book rental scheme. One of the issues that schools encounter regarding this is the set up costs. Schools receive €11 per pupil in relation to the book grant. This amount however goes nowhere near the costs of setting up or maintaining a scheme. Schools in contact with CPSMA have indicated that the book grant money had to be used to pay utility bills due to dwindling cash flow.
- 6.08.** Boards of Management should encourage the school community to consider the school's policy on the usage of school books and the reliance on text books for teaching purposes. There may be innovative ways to teach the curriculum with less text books and less workbooks particularly at middle and senior level standards.
- 6.09.** Suggestions regarding reducing the costs of books included the following:
- *Do not have too many workbooks*
 - *Use of copybook to preserve workbooks*
 - *Use of visualisers instead of workbooks*
 - *Do not change texts too frequently and reduce the number of text books. This needs to be a strong school policy and must come from senior teachers and management*
 - *Use of second hand books/second hand book sales*
 - *Rental schemes should be properly funded*
 - *Publishers should be required to maintain stocks of books in the longer term*
 - *Greater use of I. T. and photocopies*
 - *Schools should be exempted from photocopying royalty payments*
 - *Book publishing companies should bind books properly so that book rental schemes can offer books of a decent quality to students. Books are fit for the bin after three or four years.*
 - *Pressure needs to be brought to bear on publishers to stop constantly "updating" the same book. It would also help if books did not need to be written on.*
 - *Bulk-buying of books and stationery*
 - *Early notification of booklist so parents can spread the cost over the summer.*

7.00. Other Suggestions for reducing costs

- 7.01.** An information campaign which highlights the nutritional value and the savings in costs in real terms associated with packed lunches could be considered.
- 7.02.** Other suggestions which were referred to in CPSMA's survey included the following:-
- *Parents/guardians could prepare lunches and give children milk or water in order to avoid the costs of buying sandwiches, rolls etc*
 - *School tours are kept to a minimum and are close to home because of travel costs*
 - *School shops so that schools can bulk buy stationery etc and pass on the savings to parents*
 - *Schools are expected to go down the IT route with whiteboards in classes. Laptops are needed for this and someone to "fix" and oversee things. Bulbs for the boards are very expensive*
 - *Swimming does not start until after Halloween so that the cost is not at the beginning of the school year*
 - *Introduce instalment payment plans during the year, encourage ongoing payments*
 - *Discourage parents buying everything new*

- *Increase capitation grants to allow schools to offer free to parents all the usual additional activities e.g. swimming, educational tours, photocopied materials, visual arts materials etc.*
- *Restore grants to assist in the running of schools*
- *Require the Department to reverse years of underfunding to the primary sector.*

8.00. Voluntary Contributions and the timing of same

- 8.01.** Many parents want to support their child's school and want to make voluntary contributions within their means. It is an unfortunate fact that many schools have to ask for a voluntary contribution in order to make ends meet. Schools could perhaps consider spreading such requests over the entire school year so as to spread the load in regard to demands on parents. It is appreciated that parents are faced with costs for transport and childcare and the timing of all such demands can be very overwhelming. However it must also be borne in mind that many schools are experiencing serious cash flow issues.
- 8.02.** There is also the issue of funding depending on school location. Some schools have to fund raise to pay for ancillary staff whereas this does not apply to other schools. Thus certain parents may be disproportionately affected depending on where they live.
- 8.03.** The following comments were made in regard to voluntary contributions:
- *Schools need proper funding to ensure that they don't need to request a "voluntary" contribution.*
 - *It is hard to reduce voluntary contributions with so many cuts to funding by DES*
 - *We don't collect a 'local contribution' and we have deferred the collection of money for 'art and craft' until mid October.*
 - *Voluntary contributions allow the D.E.S. to avoid its duties in regard to maintaining heat, light, buildings etc.*
 - *It may cause difficulty in terms of administration but considering payment of a voluntary contribution in June, means that at least part of the expense is then spread out.*

9.00. Procurement

- 9.01.** CPSMA has engaged extensively with the National Procurement Service (NPS). It arranged for over 1,000 schools to sign up with NPS for a competition for the supply of electricity. As a result of this competition schools have achieved between 3% and 40% in savings on electricity costs. One school made a saving in excess of €6,000 in its electricity costs. CPSMA continues to engage with NPS regarding savings for schools for print materials and arrangements will shortly be put in place regarding the purchase of oil etc.
- 9.02.** Greater use of procurement should be made regarding the purchase of textbooks, uniforms and other materials by a school or a group of schools.

10.00. Conclusion

- 10.01.** It is clear that schools are doing their utmost to keep the costs of returning to school to a minimum. A number of schools have pointed out that the drastic cuts to school budgets has meant that some of the means by which costs can be reduced are no longer possible e.g. the introduction of a book rental scheme. Even if a book rental scheme is in place it takes significant sums to keep it running as books must be replaced on a regular basis.
- 10.02.** CPSMA is extremely concerned at the number of schools contacting it who are in financial difficulties. Many schools are now afraid that they will go bankrupt. In the meantime schools do not even have the money to pay for the basic necessities.
- 10.03.** CPSMA will continue to work with NPS and other interested parties to reduce costs to schools.