



The Best Education for Our Children

Labour's Schools Policy


Labour

Introduction

What is education for? In its broadest sense, education is the process through which we learn about the world – how it functions, how to navigate it, how to engage with it, and how we can contribute to it.

The primary purpose of education should be to unlock the potential of every person, and to enable them to make the most of their lives. However, the Irish school system is not designed around this fundamental principle. It is not flexible enough to embrace a wide spectrum of potential, or even multiple intelligences. Its schools are built with order rather than creativity in mind. Information is disseminated one way only: from the top down. And the value of learning is quantified almost exclusively in terms of formal assessment.

Of course variations on the above do exist. A school ethos may value art, sport or personal leadership as much as academic performance. A principal may have a vision for his or her school that drives it to excellence. A teacher may have a relationship with his or her students, which encourages lively debate. But despite the differences between schools, principals, teachers and students, they still must operate within the confines of a system with a one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum, governance, training and budget-setting.

We want to enable all schools to be excellent. We want them to be places where excellence is determined not just by exams, but also by the kind of experience a child or teenager has there. We want to support teachers so that they can constantly improve their skills, knowledge and effectiveness. We want every child to have an equal chance of success, regardless of income, class or family background. To realise these goals, we need to take a hard look at what it is within our schools and our system that is holding them back from being the best they can be.

There is astonishingly little debate about what education is for in Ireland, or the quality of schooling on offer to our children. Yet there is an obvious disjunction between the consensus, which holds that we have one of the best education systems in the world, and the manifold issues that rightly exercise parents, students, education professionals and support staff around the country.

For example, what kind of stellar education system allows its children to be educated in converted toilets or school gyms for want of adequate classroom space? The overcrowding of our schools has been a reliable headache for parents since the 1980s. Now a new generation of parents, who are living in the new outer suburbs of our cities, are facing up to the fact that it is crisis, rather than the building of thousands of new homes, that precipitates the building of a new school.

Early school leaving has plateaued since the 1980s, with 18 per cent of young people leaving school without their Leaving Certificate. This means that over 11,000 of the teenagers who received their Junior Certificate results in September 2006 will have left the system within two years.

Under-performing, alienated from an inflexible system, slipping through the gaps of an official safety net big enough only for the most vulnerable cases: they will be more likely to be unemployed, more likely to be in a low-skilled, low-paying job, more likely to go to prison and more likely to become a young parent. Would they agree that we have the best education system in the world?

Literacy and numeracy levels at the end of primary school are the most reliable predictor of performance in the Junior Certificate, and consequently of completing formal education. On their own, they are inalienable life skills that allow people to function independently in the social, economic, cultural and political life of their community. They should be the foundation stone of an excellent education system. Instead, literacy and numeracy levels have been allowed to stagnate.

Managing a school is a demanding, complex job, requiring a varied suite of skills from accounting to psychology, yet new principals receive relatively little training. Likewise, new teachers have astonishingly little on-the-job, supervised training, and are then rarely observed in the classroom for what could be a 35-year long career.

We believe that making room for innovation, opening up channels of cooperation as well as accountability, and a strong ethos of professional development will be for the benefit of every member of the extended school community: principals, teachers, students and parents.

An excellent education system should be excellent for everyone. Yet, despite the Education for Persons with Special Needs Act of 2004, the de facto segregation of pupils with special needs continues unabated. Schools are not actively obliged to accept pupils with special needs, accessing professional support is difficult and slow for schools, pupil and parents alike, and many of the thousands of special educational needs (SEN) staff added to the payroll in recent years lack any specialised training.

This situation is not going to change without the kind of support that will allow special needs students to be seamlessly integrated into the mainstream. Simply adding extra adults, in the form of SEN staff, and extra capitation is not going to make that happen. Schools need to be able to access educational psychologists where and when they deem it necessary. They should not have to submit every child about whom they are concerned to a psychological assessment in order to receive professional advice and departmental funding.

When a child is diagnosed with learning or an emotional difficulty, the school and parents should have just one contact person who is aware of the child's case, and able to coordinate the services available. Finally, if a child is receiving special needs support at primary level, the battle for those resources should not have to begin afresh when that child begins secondary school.

Integrating a child with special needs into a school should not be a crisis, a battle or a frustration. An adequately resourced, comprehensive national educational psychological service, combined with regulation to ensure that no child is discriminated against on the grounds that he or she has special needs, is what is needed to make what was promised in the 2004 Act a reality.

Finally, to return to the values our education system represents and reproduces. Many column inches and parental headaches have been devoted to such issues as binge drinking, reckless boy racing, eating disorders, depression and suicide among young people. We are more affluent than ever before, but with affluence come new choices, pressures and uncertainties. This is arguably the most confident, most privileged generation of Irish people yet, so why do they appear to be so ill at ease with themselves?

Irish society has changed dramatically over the past 30 years. However, the values which inform our education system have stagnated. Our schools are still built to privilege didactic learning. Our system is designed for 'average' children who do not exist. Equality of access to education has not resulted in equality of outcome. Our teenagers' personal, emotional, social and political education is left to chance.

If we want to secure a bright future for our children, it is time that we built education around their needs, rather than the perceived limits of the system. A holistic education that teaches students how to make reasoned choices, how to cope with change, how to communicate with others and what values they can choose to live their lives by can give young people the tools they need to make the most of themselves and, by extension, the society they live in.

Our schools policy is a blueprint for how the Labour Party believes this kind of education should be delivered. We need to get the basic elements right: more schools, more money for schools and more effective teaching of literacy and numeracy. But equally as important, we need schools and staff that are an inspiration to pupils, teachers and parents alike. We need well-resourced support services so that no child is allowed to slip through the net. And we need a new curriculum at second level that encourages learning for its own sake, and the formation of a well-rounded, self-aware young person educated for the challenges of the future.

These are the characteristics of a truly excellent education system, and an education system we are committed to creating.

1. Preschool

Pre-school education should be a right, not a luxury. Structured play and early education are important elements in developing a child's capacity to interact with others, language acquisition and learning skills – all of which are essential building blocks for their future education. Currently Ireland has one of the lowest rates of enrolment in state-funded pre-school in the EU. The average time spent by 3-7 year olds in pre-school education is a mere 0.1 years, as opposed to the EU-25 average of 2.6 years.

Pre-school education, presently largely confined to those who can afford it, can be extremely effective at tackling educational disadvantage. In fact, addressing the needs of children from disadvantaged homes at the earliest possible stage can help counteract educational disadvantage at a fraction of the cost to society, and to the child themselves, of subsequent interventions. There is ample evidence that childcare and early education costs pay for themselves as much as seven times over.

We believe that preschool education will, in time, be recognised as being as important to a child's formation as primary and secondary schooling. As recently as the 1960s secondary education was regarded as the privilege of the affluent few; now it is unthinkable that the training, skills and personal development afforded by secondary education would not be open to all. The advantages afforded by pre-school education are long-overdue such recognition.

Labour believes that every child in Ireland should be entitled to free pre-school education. We would see this entitlement involving provision of five half-days per week, in the year immediately prior to entry to primary school.

We do not underestimate the scale of the challenge involved in delivering on this promise. However, just as we can provide free education at primary, secondary and third level, we can deliver on an extra year's schooling that will give every child the best possible start in life.

Labour in Government will:

- Provide one year of free pre-school education (five half days per week) for every child.

2. School Leadership

If we are serious about helping our schools to perform better, we need to change the way they are run. Governance embraces the role of principals, teachers, parents and students in the internal running of a school and the Department of Education's duties in relation to school resources and standards.

We are committed to a more democratic school model, where all of these groups work in partnership to develop a school that brings out the best in staff and students. We will do this through fostering school leadership, promoting the professional development of teachers, encouraging students to engage in their own learning, and making what goes on within schools more transparent.

Our vision for schools is one of empowerment. We will expect more from our schools, our school leaders and our teachers. But we will also give them the support and resources they need to meet the challenge of bringing Irish education into the 21st century.

2.1 Principals

Teaching remains an extremely attractive career path for some of our brightest graduates, with many more applicants than vacant teaching posts. However, the number of applicants for principalships has steadily declined from 5.5 applicants for every vacancy in 1996 to 2.3 applicants per vacancy in 2005. The consequences of this alarming drop in applicants should not be underestimated.

A good school needs a leader who is an innovator, a motivator, a team builder, a diplomat, a creator of a learning and teaching culture that elicits the best from students and teachers, a person with the capacity to manage a very substantial highly trained team representing significant human resources, a person of financial skill, and a person above all who is an inspiration to students, parents, staff and the wider community in which a school is located.

All of this has to be achieved within an increasingly complex educational framework of obligations, rights and responsibilities, some informally stated, and more increasingly required by law.

At present there is a worrying lack of formality in the training and appointment of such vital personnel. Furthermore, the current contract, which sees principals hold the post in perpetuity, does not reflect contemporary thinking on the life cycle of energy, flow of new ideas and level of commitment that can be sustained by high-level managers.

Our schools deserve the best leaders they can get, and our leaders deserve to be trained, supported and trusted. In government we will radically enhance educational leadership by:

- Making all new appointments for a ten-year period only. At the completion of their tenure, the principal would retain their entitlement to their pension and would revert to normal teaching with certain special allowances or could compete for a principalship in another school.
- Requiring all principals to have completed a designated Master's degree in Educational Management.
- Agreeing the design and content of an appropriate qualification in consultation with the Education and Management Departments of appropriate third level institutions, which would have responsibility for the courses.
- Making relevant expertise available to boards of management when selecting a new principal.
- Establishing an appropriately attractive pay scale for principals.
- Devolving more autonomy to school principals in the use of teaching and other resources.

Established principals, prior to the introduction of the new contract, will be entitled to retain their position until retirement. However, sitting principals who wish to transfer to the ten-year contract will be considered for such entitlement.

The above reforms will be introduced on a phased basis, and will initially apply only to non-teaching principals in primary and second-level schools.

2.3 Teachers

When it comes to teaching, there is no 'one size fits all' model. What works for one school, one class or even one student might not work for another. We want to make it easier for teachers to find what does work, to share that knowledge with others, and to continue to improve the learning experience of their students throughout their career.

It is extremely important that teachers develop a good teaching practice from the very beginning of their career. At present there is no requirement to supervise trainee teachers in their classroom. The obligatory inspection day by the department is flagged months in advance and is thus unlikely to be a full reflection of a teacher's methodology and inter-personal skills. At second level, teachers receive little training in conflict resolution or other inter-personal skills specific to building up relationships with teenagers.

We believe that the National Pilot Project on Induction, introduced four years ago, should be institutionalised as soon as possible. This scheme takes a whole school approach to supporting newly qualified primary teachers, providing in-school mentors for new teachers in their first year of teaching. This could not be further from the situation at present, where official 'probationary work' is confined to the 2.5 days during which a departmental inspector comes to evaluate a new teacher.

Similarly, newly qualified second level teachers deserve more support and training than they receive at present. We believe that the HDip should be

expanded in order for prospective teachers to gain maximum teaching experience during their training. It should also incorporate a significant module on interpersonal relationships in the classroom and conflict resolution. Furthermore, the National Pilot Project on Induction should be extended to newly-qualified secondary school teachers.

Regarding ongoing professional development, simply expanding the current in-service system or ad hoc approach to external training is not the answer. In service as it currently stands is fragmented, content-based rather than skill based, and happens away from the school community.

Though curriculum in service is important, we want to develop the capacities of schools to improve their teaching standards according to their particular needs. This would be achieved three ways: through the piloting of new curricula and pedagogy by the DES with a view to demonstrating how change might be effected; the principal-teacher agreement regarding the latter's personal professional development; and institutionalising collaborative classroom and whole-school planning between teachers and school leaders.

An agreed programme of personal professional development should be drawn up between the principal and each teacher in the school, to be overseen and reviewed at the end of the school year. Ongoing professional development should be the norm in our schools, and should be facilitated as much as possible.

We want to challenge the notion that teaching happens in isolation, and promote opportunities for greater openness and collaboration between teachers, principals and the DES. We have an invaluable resource in the professional knowledge, talent and experience of our educational professionals. Our proposals are aimed at tapping that existing knowledge and building on it to improve overall teaching standards and learning outcomes.

We will:

- Require principals and teachers to draw up an agreed programme of professional development for each individual teacher, to be reviewed at the end of the school year.
- Fund an agreed number of days substitution per year for teachers participating in professional development.
- Establish a dedicated fund within the DES to which schools may apply to fund professional development for staff.
- Extend the National Pilot Project on Induction to all primary and secondary schools.
- Review the content and duration of secondary school teacher training with a view to further developing practical classroom experience and the interpersonal skills appropriate to a classroom situation.
- Ensure that the mandate of the Teaching Council to regulate the teaching profession and the professional conduct of teachers is fulfilled.

2.4 Parents and students

Education is a collaborative exercise involving students, parents and teachers. We believe that schools would benefit from improved channels of communication between all three groups. This can be achieved through greater transparency on the part of schools, reciprocal rights and responsibilities agreed between the three groups and mechanisms for student and parental input in the running of a school.

We will:

- Draw up guidelines so that schools can design their own Home-School Agreements. These agreements will set out in clear and inclusive terms the respective responsibilities of the school, parents and the pupil, and will be agreed by all three.
- Oblige schools to publish an annual whole school report. This will contain general information about the school, such as its rules, ethos and extracurricular activities. It will also contain a financial report for the previous school year.
- Tackle the poverty of aspiration among some students by drawing up guidelines for individual study agreements at second level that will actively engage students in their own learning and help teachers, parents and students to set academic targets for the year ahead.

3. Funding

At 4.5 per cent of GDP, Ireland lags behind the education spending of most other OECD countries in almost every sector. Even adjusted for Gross National Income, we still only scrape into the average bracket for the funding of education.

These figures translate into a truth known to almost every parent in the country: our schools, and particularly our primary schools, cannot make ends meet without generous voluntary contributions, fundraising and overdraft facilities. The bottom line is that if we were spending enough on education, we would not have a “free” education system which, in practice, is only part-funded by the state.

We believe that when it comes to education, free means free. At present, hardworking families could be forgiven for thinking that their taxes are bypassing our primary and secondary schools altogether, leaving them to fundraise and donate extra cash to keep their children in safe, clean, well-equipped classrooms.

Currently schools’ discretionary funds are provided by a capitation grant based on their enrolment figures for the school year. However, if one school has 100 pupils in one year and 80 the next, the cost of electricity, heating, cleaning and repairs remains the same while the amount of money available to pay for them is reduced by 20 per cent. Furthermore, insurance can claim a majority share of the capitation grant, leaving very little for other bills, let alone computers, art materials, sports equipment or even general school upkeep.

Many of the financial problems which face primary schools are replicated at second level, despite the latter’s higher capitation grant. The best second level schools can afford to offer a wide variety of subjects for a wide spectrum of student interests and ability. They can offer good sports, drama, music, art, woodwork and other facilities, as well as after school study and extra-curricular activities. If we want every state school to be one of the best we can offer our children, then we have to reform the structure for funding free second level schools, and give them the resources they need to compete.

Raising the capitation grant and rationalising the current maze of grants into one block grant that could be used on a multi-annual basis would see an end to this extra burden on parents, and will release principals from fundraising to focus on school leadership and development.

To do this we will:

- Double the primary school capitation grant to €320 to recognise the real cost of running a primary school.
- Increase the per capita funding for all pupils in second level schools by €300

- Increase the capitation element of the current Maintenance Grant to €25.
- Replace the rest of the complicated grants system for primary and second level schools with a single block grant that can be used on a multi-annual basis if required.
- Increase the ancillary grant for secretarial and caretaker staff to €200 per pupil
- Have the State Claims Agency carry out an assessment of insurance costs in all schools with a view to reducing risks and premia. Options to be examined include the centralised purchasing of insurance for all primary and voluntary secondary schools and the indemnification of schools by the state.

3.1 Class sizes

- We will progressively reduce average class sizes towards the EU norm. We will cap class sizes at 15:1 in schools where there is significant disadvantage and progressively move towards capping class sizes at 25:1 in mainstream primary schools.

4. Equity

The aim of our education policy is to improve the whole educational experience of all students. Better school management, more generous funding for school staff, materials, equipment and facilities, better school buildings, community involvement, and a senior cycle curriculum flexible enough to play to the strengths of a wider variety of students will benefit every school-going child in the country.

However, it is a bare fact that each child's resources has a significant bearing on their chance of success in school, and that the disparity between these resources can be immense. Parental education, economic poverty, family break-up, poor housing, ethnic or cultural difference, rural isolation, absenteeism, pupil-teacher ratio, under-resourced schools and the suitability of the education system itself can all contribute to underachievement at school.

The Labour Party's aim in government is to ensure that the education system of the state, paid for through common taxation, ensures equality of outcome as well as equality of provision. In other words, regardless of a child's resources or family background, he or she will have the same chance of succeeding at school as any other.

4.1 Literacy and Numeracy

The most recent study carried out by the DES showed that over 40 per cent of students in some disadvantaged primary schools had very poor reading skills, while over 60 per cent had considerable difficulties with maths. This means that students are making the transition to second level without achieving competency in literacy or numeracy, thus severely limiting their chances of success as they progress through their education.

Poor performance in literacy in disadvantaged schools is linked to parental educational attainment and other personal factors, but it is exacerbated when schools do not have the resources to reduce class sizes and provide sufficient learning support. A 2004 ERC survey of English language skills found that First Class pupils in disadvantaged schools were four times more likely to be taught by an unqualified teacher.

Despite improvements over the last decade in school-level pupil-teacher ratio and the availability of computers and books, reading and numeracy standards have remained largely the same. Indeed, overall literacy rates have not changed significantly since 1980. This should indicate that simply diverting more money to literacy is not the answer. What we need is a new approach.

We need all teachers to be trained specifically to teach literacy and numeracy well. Evidence suggests that investment in teacher training returns significantly greater dividends in terms of pupil achievement than investment in reducing the teacher-pupil ratio. In particular, we need them to be able to design and teach lessons to a mixed-ability class, including pupils receiving literacy or numeracy support.

We need to measure literacy and numeracy annually at a national level, collate the results and help individual schools to interpret their pupils' performance. From this individual schools and the DES should jointly draw up a whole-school target for literacy and numeracy standards, a plan for their realisation and a means of evaluating the learning outcomes arising from the plan. This will require more extensive collaboration between teachers and school principals.

Early language acquisition is a crucial element in successfully learning to read and solve mathematical problems. We have promised to provide a pre-school place to every child in the country for one year. We will provide for additional pre-school hours for children participating in Early Start.

Finally, we cannot succeed without parents. Literacy is as much about the home as about school. We need to make all parents aware of the benefits of reading with their children. Where they have literacy difficulties themselves we need to provide them with support. This can be done through the Home-School-Community Liaison scheme, through school-based family literacy initiatives or community adult literacy classes.

Our open schools policy which will see that schools are insured and kept open for multiple uses will facilitate these services. However, we will also expect local authorities to tackle obstacles to literacy which are in their control, such as ensuring that children living in local authority housing have enough space to do their homework and read in peace, and opening public libraries at weekends.

A higher standard in literacy and numeracy for all is at the centre of our programme for equality of outcome in Irish education.

We will:

- Collate standardised literacy and numeracy test results nationally in order to assess standards and pupil progression.
- Give schools support in the interpretation of the results of standardised literacy and numeracy tests, the communication of the results to parents and in drawing up action plans to improve their teaching of literacy and numeracy.
- Require all primary school teachers to undertake more intensive training in literacy and numeracy education, with extra subsequent training available to teachers working in disadvantaged schools. Our goal is that all teachers, and especially teachers working in disadvantaged schools, would be flexible enough to adapt their teaching practice to small groups where necessary.
- Require schools to develop whole school literacy policies and target outcomes for class groups and individuals, and to have an in-school reporting mechanism through which teachers would report on the progress of their teaching and learning objectives.
- Establish a mechanism for the mainstreaming of successful school initiatives supporting literacy.
- Provide appropriate funding and training for Family Literacy schemes.

- Provide speech and language therapy support to schools with the greatest need to address the issue of language delay among Junior and Senior Infants
- Remove the cap on English language support teachers in schools. Schools will receive a teacher allocation according to the needs of their pupils. The principal may then choose how to organise staff timetables and to recruit staff with the appropriate skills for a specific student population.
- Have the Department of Education and Science conduct a comprehensive review of the communication needs of pupils for whom English or Irish is not their first language in order to develop a coherent national policy framework for English language teaching and communication in schools.
- Extend teaching hours for maths support for students with very weak mathematical skills.
- Require public libraries to increase their opening hours and to have outreach programmes aimed at maximising community literacy.
- Provide for homework clubs run by trained tutors in schools with low achievement in literacy and numeracy.
- Work with local authorities to incorporate educational facilities, such as space for homework clubs, into local authority housing developments.

4.2 Early school leaving

Those with low literacy and numeracy skills are also more likely to leave school with no qualifications, and are consequently more likely to be unemployed. The number of young people leaving school without any qualification has remained stubbornly at 18 per cent since 1991. However, in some areas that figure is as high as 59 per cent.

The Department of Education estimates that up to 1000 children fail to progress from primary to secondary school every year. Children's charity Barnardos estimates that one in five children from disadvantaged areas miss more than 20 days of primary and secondary school in a given year, while up to 80 per cent of Traveller children aged 12 to 15 do not attend secondary school.

The National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) was established under the Education Welfare Act of 2000 to combat absenteeism and to implement programmes to reduce the numbers of early school leavers. However, the under-resourcing of this important service means that it can only respond to the most chronic cases of absenteeism.

We will:

- Resource the NEWB adequately so that it can fulfil its mandate and devote some of its energy to pro-actively preventing at-risk children from dropping out of school.
- Progressively explore the option of training and employing members of the local community as Home School Liaison Officers.

- Give a social guarantee to all 16 to 18 year-olds of training, a school place or meaningful work.
- Explore how Youthreach can be expanded, and its position within the education system strengthened.

4.3 Tackling Disadvantage

If free schooling and objective state exams were enough to level the academic and social playing field in Ireland, we would have achieved equality of outcome in our education system long ago. Instead, patterns of intergenerational poverty are depressingly ingrained, educational achievement continues to have a strong correlation with family background, and extra-curricular study support or activities are largely confined to those who can afford to pay for them.

A genuine commitment to equal life chances for every child requires that we address the whole spectrum of resources that accompany children to school from preschool onwards. This means taking a whole-child, whole-school, whole-community approach to education.

We propose that instead of a league table where only the most disadvantaged schools benefit from extra support, the current system used to assess school disadvantage (i.e. the number of pupils from a family in which the main breadwinner has been unemployed for over a year, whose family hold a medical card, who live in a lone parent household or in rented accommodation etc.) should be used instead to ‘weight’ every school-going child in the country according to his or her needs.

Extra financial and other support from the Department of Education would be distributed among all schools, as opposed to just those designated as disadvantaged, according to the cumulative ‘weight’ of the school’s pupils.

In this way, schools with the highest proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds would still receive the most support, but schools which have pockets of disadvantaged pupils would also receive resources to help them address these children’s needs. Control over the form and/or use of these extra resources would be in the hands of the school principal, with some regulation.

Unlike the current system, which sees 1,900 schools outside the DEIS scheme eligible only for extra capitation relative to their levels of disadvantage, our proposals would see schools also receive benefits in kind to help them tackle disadvantage. Thus, depending on what ‘band’ they fall into, schools can access a variety of different resources appropriate to their student body.

This system recognises that just as there is no ‘average’ pupil, there are no ‘average’ schools. As it stands, our education system is not designed for pupils with difficulties or problems. Our proposals recognise that a greater flexibility in the way resources are distributed will allow school leaders to respond to respond to the needs of all of their charges.

Our proposals will also do away with the ring-fencing of schools as designated sites of disadvantage, a practice which can contribute to poor morale in the school and its community.

4.4 Study Support

Extra-curricular activities, which allow children and young people to exercise their talents and develop their social, interpersonal and leadership skills, are an essential part of developing the whole person. As the School Completion Programme has shown, they can also help young people at risk of dropping out of school.

We believe that schools in disadvantaged communities should have access to a study support fund, which it could use to provide after-school and holiday activities for its students. This could range from music or dance lessons, to training with local football clubs or study skills seminars, and be arranged in partnership with local youth organisations.

4.5 Fair access to schools

Ensuring that schools cater to a broad spectrum of abilities, backgrounds and cultures is an important step in creating a more equal society. Discrimination on the grounds of previous academic achievement, religion or social background is not compatible with improving participation and equality in education.

We will:

- Regulate schools' admission policies in line with the Education Act (1998) to ensure that schools are genuinely inclusive.
- Ensure that new and existing schools in receipt of state aid respond to the needs of a more diverse school-going population.

5. Curriculum Reform

5.1 Rethinking the second level curriculum

If curriculum is an expression of what society thinks education is for, we would appear to regard education as a training in stamina, memory and exam technique. While the primary level curriculum has become more child-focused in recent years, the second level curriculum continues to promote rote learning and the passive absorption of information emanating from the top of a classroom.

This is completely at odds with our conviction that education should develop the whole person. It should develop their social and emotional intelligence, as well as their academic potential. Our vision of the well-rounded student who is equipped with the tools to make the most of the society in which they live cannot be realised without significant broadening of what is learnt in schools, and the way in which it is taught.

Introducing an emphasis on self-directed learning, social and emotional resilience in the face of new and changing demands, and the development of core competencies lays the foundations for education for life. Furthermore, greater flexibility in the type of subjects taken can reflect more accurately a student's full potential. We want to provide students with a curriculum that encourages them to see how their education will help them get the most out of life.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has devised a comprehensive proposal for the development of a new senior cycle curriculum which is adaptive to individuals' needs, broadens the range of subjects and learning opportunities open to students and includes training and assessment of multiple skills and competencies.

It also features courses not eligible for points, but which are studied with the emotional, social and creative development of a student in mind. We believe that the importance of equipping our young people with the personal skills they need to cope with a rapidly-changing world and increasingly pressurised society should be reflected in a strengthening of this element of the new curriculum.

The revised curriculum would see students able to take a mixture of short and long courses for their Leaving Certificate, broadening their knowledge and giving them the chance to enjoy subjects beyond those that they may need for points. It gives the brightest students a chance to excel and gives students who struggle to perform within the narrow confines of the current system more flexibility to demonstrate their potential. Most importantly, we believe that it will make schools more dynamic, enjoyable places to be for hundreds of thousands of teenagers.

We are committed to implementing this new curriculum and providing sufficient resources to allow all schools to exploit its benefits fully.

Our specific commitments include:

- The progressive implementation of the NCCA's proposal for a revised senior cycle.
- Enabling all schools to offer a three-year senior cycle at second level.
- The reform of maths and science teaching and curriculum as set out in our policy 'Formula for Success'.
- Extending the use of oral skills in language examinations.
- Extending Social, Personal and Health education to all schools and emphasising its importance in the syllabus. Teachers will undergo pre-service and in-service training in Relationships and Sexuality Education, which will include an expanded section on sexual diversity.
- Provision of funds under the school works programme to provide non-classroom learning facilities for all secondary schools or clusters of schools.

5.2 The Arts

We can have no way of knowing the talent and enjoyment contained within children and young people who are not exposed to the arts at home unless they have that opportunity in school. We believe that the arts should be central to the educational experience of every child.

Music is one of the most accessible art forms. However, in the absence of a qualified music teacher to show the potential of music making, or access to an instrument, only children whose parents can afford to purchase music lessons privately are exposed to the joy of being able to play.

To combat this, we will introduce a Music Entitlement Scheme for primary school children. During one year of their primary schooling, each child will be eligible for vouchers for music lessons from a qualified teacher.

It will take time to accrue a bank of instruments and expertise, but we envision that within four years every child in the country who wished to avail of the scheme would be entitled to 30 hours of free tuition in one of at least four instruments.

Our commitment to increased capitation for schools will address the deficit in art materials for schools. We will also pioneer an 'artist in residence' scheme which will facilitate the employment of professional artists to work with teachers and pupils to produce artwork that would have a lasting impact on the school environment or community.

The arts should not be a luxury for our children: they should be a part of their daily lives. In government we will:

- Establish the Music Entitlement Scheme, which would entitle every child to 30 hours free music tuition in the course of one primary school year.

- Provide for artists to work with teachers and pupils on group projects for the benefit of the school or the community.

5.3 Sport

For all the lip service paid to childhood obesity, the lack of teenage girls playing sport and the supposed role of sport in the school curriculum, the actual status of PE in Irish schools tells a completely different story.

The Departmental recommendation of one hour of physical activity a week for primary school children is meaningless if a school does not have even basic recreational facilities. In future, no new schools should be built without indoor and outdoor recreation space. Those schools which currently do not have access to recreation space should be assisted in forging partnerships with local sporting bodies in order to share suitable facilities.

Almost a quarter of second level schools do not have a qualified PE teacher. A number of core activities recommended in the PE syllabus (i.e. dance and swimming) are not available in the PE timetable in many schools. We believe that the staff and facilities need to be put in place to ensure that all students have the chance to avail of a varied, challenging curriculum. To further incentivise the teaching of PE the subject will be made a points-earning subject for the Junior and Leaving Certificates.

We know the benefits of sport to children and teenagers: how it is good for their health, their stress and concentration levels and their social lives and self-esteem. We believe that a serious move to deepen the sport and recreation culture in our schools is long overdue.

In government we will:

- Make PE an examinable subject at Junior and Leaving Certificate level
- Ensure that every second level school has their own, or access to, a qualified PE teacher.
- Enable schools to develop partnerships with local sports clubs and organisations in order to share facilities, where appropriate.

6. Buildings

According to the ESRI, the primary school-aged population is forecast to increase by between 18 and 29 per cent over the next decade. This means that classroom space will need to be found for approximately 100,000 new primary school pupils.

At present, schoolchildren around the country are being taught in converted toilets and secondary school gyms for lack of adequate planning. The housing construction boom took no heed of the families that would occupy the new estates popping up around the country because the government did not require it to.

Over the past number of years, and under increasing pressure from parents and teachers, the Department of Education has attempted to address the woeful disrepair of some of our schools, overcrowding and the shortage of school places. However, in the face of an imminent population swell of around 100,000 school pupils alone, the Department's extensions and paint jobs are simply not going to be enough.

Short-sighted extensions are like layering sticking plaster upon sticking plaster until what could have been a whole new school becomes a mishmash of concrete extensions. In the process, the school building eats up the surrounding space that should be for play, sport, gardening, performing or any other outdoor activity our children might enjoy. The result: instead of a new school for a growing community, it gets a decline in the aesthetic and spatial quality of its old school for all of its pupils – new and old.

School accommodation is facing a crisis in Ireland, and the drip-drip of stories about special needs pupils being tutored in broom cupboards and children forced to delay starting school until they are six years old is only the beginning. However, this crisis could be a fantastic opportunity for a new, innovative government to build a new generation of schools.

In some parts of the country, Irish children are being educated in schools built a century ago. If new schools are to last as long, they should be built to a design and standard that takes a long view. The Labour Party believes that new schools should reflect the future of teaching and learning as much as the physical needs of the community they serve.

6.1 A new wave of schools

We want to see an end to sterile school architecture that seems to put children's experience of school at the bottom of its priorities. Schools are supposed to open minds, not box them off. In government we will build a new kind of school along the following principles:

- Schools will be built according to the current and projected needs of the community they are intended for.

- School space will be fluid enough to be able to adapt to various teaching methods, diverse uses and to variations on group sizes. For example, school space will be adaptable to PE, music or woodwork, as well as small group tutoring.
- Classrooms will be big enough to be able to move furniture easily to facilitate group work, and have enough 'free' space for unstructured play, reading, art, performing etc.
- The school grounds will be regarded as an extension of the classroom. They will be as natural as possible, and be spacious enough to accommodate a school garden
- All new schools will have sports facilities that will also be available to the community.
- All new schools will be low-energy, sustainable buildings.

6.2 A school place for every child

Despite having access to the demographic data, resources and expertise to identify the need for a school, build and staff it, the state has not directly established any new primary schools since its foundation. This is partly explained by the fact that responsibility for building new schools lies exclusively with the Department of Education.

Demographic monitoring, land purchase and school construction would be better suited to a body with national-level competencies in these areas. The National Development Finance Agency is exceptionally well-suited to planning and managing public construction projects.

Firstly, the NDFA should be given the task of devising a model that can relate residential development and demographic shifts to the demand for school places.

The NDFA should also be invested with the power to respond to such information, and to procure land for schools and to build new schools or school extensions in advance of schools reaching their full capacity. The NDFA's school building remit would be overseen by the Minister for Education, and schools would be designed and built according to principles set out above and other Department of Education requirements.

Where necessary, the state should be the patron of new schools. Instead of the community searching for a patron with the will and the funds to take on the running of a school, the state will have the option of assuming the patronage of a school. This will allow it to be established, built and up and running as it is needed.

None of this is rocket science. Our goal is simple: to have school accommodation built well before existing schools are at crisis point.

We want to see an end to sprawling prefabs – classrooms not worthy of our children or our teaching professionals. They are environmentally

unsustainable, take up valuable recreational land and are not consonant with our vision of a welcoming, bright, eco-friendly, child-centred school.

To deliver schools efficiently where and when they are needed, we will:

- Give the National Development Finance Agency the task of tracking residential development and population patterns, and of developing a model that will be able to predict when and where demographic change will lead to a demand for school places.
- Give the NDFA the power to procure land and build world class schools according to guidelines established by the Department of Education
- Future-proof new schools against the anticipated needs of communities.
- Allow the state to be the patron of new schools where necessary. These schools will cater for children of all denominations and of none.

6.3 Schools as a community resource

Schools are already a valuable community resource, but they could also be breakfast and homework clubs, adult education providers, family counselling centres, sports clubs, dance studios or community meeting places. Some schools already host some, or even all, of these things. We want to enable all schools to open their gates to the wider community.

Family and community life is changing, and we need to make positive moves to adapt to new needs and pressures. Opening schools for longer to provide for supervised breakfast and homework clubs would, for example, move to address some of the pressure on increasing numbers of working parents, as well as ensuring that all children eat a healthy breakfast and have a place to do their homework.

Running adult education or family counselling services out of schools in the evening or weekends means that if the demand exists for these services, lack of accommodation will not be an obstacle. Schools have sports facilities that could be shared with local clubs, which could in turn contribute to the development of such facilities.

Making it the focal point of the community has the added benefit of breaking down social barriers that may exist between the school, parents and children, and giving everyone in the community a stake in the development of their local school.

The oft-cited barriers to making schools multi-use community facilities are insurance and staffing. Neither of these obstacles is insurmountable. We have already stated how school insurance could be provided centrally. Similarly, caretaking staff or breakfast club supervisors, for example, can be funded from an expanded staffing budget.

Schools built and run using public money should be open to the public. If they can be used for the wider benefit of the community they serve, we believe that they should be enabled to do so.

In government we will:

- Make school opening hours and the option of using schools as multiple-use facilities a condition of state funding.
- Address the insurance and staffing needs that accompany longer opening hours and multiple uses.

7. Special Needs and Support Services

At present, the Irish school system is not designed to cope with children with special educational needs. Acquiring support for special needs students is more akin to crisis management than an acceptance that special needs pupils are the one constant in an increasingly diverse school population.

Special needs pupils are not anomalies in the school system – they are part of the mainstream. From improving teacher efficacy when dealing with special needs in the classroom to raising awareness of children’s mental health, we badly need a whole-school approach to special needs, underpinned by a comprehensive educational psychology service.

The current system, which sees schools declining to enrol special needs students on the basis of ‘insufficient resources’, is unacceptable. The result has been the de facto segregation of special needs students, and their disproportionate concentration in the second level schools which accept them. Schools must accept their responsibility to educate a diverse population, with diverse talents and needs. However, schools should also have ongoing access to support services as a matter of course, rather than as a crisis response.

The structure, resources and mandate of the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) belie the government’s commitment to supporting children with special needs, their schools and their families.

Around 143 state-funded educational psychologists serve a school-going population of almost 800,000. The current staffing level of the NEPS is grossly insufficient to meet the demand for assessment, which is often a precondition of accessing special needs resources.

Lack of resources has also significantly skewed the purpose of the NEPS towards once-off assessment and away from building the capacity of schools to address a wide variety of pupil needs, both educational and psychological.

The assessment of a child for learning or emotional difficulties is only the beginning of the process of helping that child to succeed at school. The adults who deal with the child in his or her everyday context – teachers and parents – also need to be trained and supported. The provision of thousands of extra special educational needs staff over recent years will not yield sufficient returns unless they too are adequately trained and have access to professional expertise.

As well as providing learning support, a properly-funded and structured psychology service would have the capacity to support teachers and guidance counsellors in identifying behavioural or mental health problems early on. This could be across a range of challenges currently facing schools, from suicide and deliberate self-harm to poor discipline in the classroom.

We propose that a national educational psychology service should be able to provide a basic level of service to all children in all mainstream schools. Extra, specialised support would be available to particularly vulnerable social groups. Each school would have a named educational psychologist available to it who would support teachers, special educational needs staff and guidance counsellors, as well as handling ongoing client casework. Instead of the population being divided into 'low incidence' or 'high incidence' as it is at present, access to an educational psychologist as a matter of course would allow for the whole spectrum of children's needs to be considered.

We recognise that the needs of some children may be better met outside of mainstream schools, at least for some of the time. This decision must always be made in partnership with parents. The most appropriate setting may be separate provision leading to gradual transition to mainstream, dual enrolment in a special and a mainstream school or special schools which are separate but integrated into the overall service.

In government we will:

- Progressively increase the number of national educational psychologists to 400.
- Restore the original mandate of the NEPS to enable it to contribute to teacher in-service and work with schools to develop whole-school systems for dealing with educational and emotional needs of students.
- Allocate a full-time educational psychologist to schools on a clustering basis.
- If a child requires multiple supports, the named psychologist assigned to his school will coordinate the services he is accessing.
- Ensure that the resources available to a child with special needs at primary level are also available to that child at second level in advance of the child beginning First Year.
- Integrate the wide range of agencies and bodies providing support to children and schools into a more coherent, user-friendly structure.
- We will sanction the 12 ABA schools awaiting Department recognition and engage with parental groups who are seeking to have early assessment and autism-specific methods supported by the state.

7.1 Caring for young people

- An expanded National Educational Psychologist Service will also underpin more general school-based counselling and programmes addressing mental health among young people.
- Specifically to address the widespread problem of homophobic bullying in our schools, the Department of Education and Science will issue clear guidelines to schools outlining their responsibility to address homophobic bullying among students and teachers.
- We will facilitate the sharing of best practice between schools which have implemented successful policies and programmes addressing sexuality and homophobic bullying.