

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Literacy is the key that unlocks a child's education. It is the most basic, and the most important, life skill that our schools teach. Labour wants to ensure that no child leaves an Irish school without being able to read and write.

Labour will develop, as an urgent national priority, a national strategy plan to improve overall youth literacy levels. The plan will have agreed national outcomes and specific targets for disadvantaged children and young people, as recommended by the NESF report *Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues*.

This paper sets out how Labour will make literacy a national priority:

Primary Education

Responsibility for achieving the objectives of this national strategy will be devolved to schools.

- Every primary school must develop a whole school literacy plan, with target outcomes for class groups, which correspond with national objectives.
- Responsibility for achieving these outcomes will be vested in the school principal.
- Each DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) school will have access to an experienced literacy mentor charged with the professional development of staff.
- In tandem with improved teaching practice, all non-DEIS primary schools will be mandated to devote a minimum of 90 minutes of class time to literacy instruction per day, across the curriculum. DEIS schools would be required to teach literacy across the curriculum for up to 120 minutes per day. Teaching literacy better and for longer is the key to breaking through Ireland's literacy plateau. Part of this time can also be met by incorporating literacy tuition into the teaching of other subjects, so as to minimise the impact of extra time on the rest of the curriculum.
- Whole-school literacy plans will be required to incorporate more regular and structured feedback to parents about their child's literacy standard, as it compares nationally, and as it compares with their fellow pupils.

Second Level Education

Every school will draw up a literacy plan based on its assessment of pupils at first and third year, with targets for improvement that correspond with national objectives.

- Responsibility for improving literacy in the school will be vested in the principal.
- Pre-service and in-service for all second level teachers will include instruction on the teaching of literacy across the curriculum.
- Professional development for teachers in DEIS schools will be prioritised; it will be required that literacy instruction be integrated into subject classes.

Adopt a whole child approach

Target literacy black spots through an area-based response to literacy.

- Following the model of *youngballymun*, public health officials, teachers and schools, local authorities, and non-governmental organisations will coordinate their activities to address whole-community literacy.
- Work with local authorities to implement Labour's 'Right to Read' policies, including minimum size guidelines for social housing, longer opening hours for libraries, and supporting library outreach policies, such as study zones and the 'Baby Books Bundle' to encourage new parents to read to their baby.

MAKING LITERACY A NATIONAL CAUSE

One in ten Irish children has serious difficulty with reading and writing, or almost 50,000 primary school pupils. This rises to as many as one in three children in some disadvantaged schools. At second level, 17 per cent of fifteen year-olds – and as many as one in four teenage boys – do not have the literacy skills necessary to function in today's knowledge-intensive society.

Literacy is the key that unlocks a child's education. It is the most basic, and the most important, life skill that our schools teach. No child should leave school without being able to read and write. Yet, every year, thousands do.

Every young person who leaves school unable to read and write represents a failure of our education system. Inadequate literacy is a key driver of early school leaving. It has a permanent scarring effect on life prospects.

However, inadequate literacy across a population can also act as a potential drag on economic growth. Historically, high levels of literacy contributed to Ireland's productivity leap between 1980 and 2001. However, our educational advantage is being undermined by developing economies seeking to close that gap.

Irish society, our workplaces and our economy have changed radically since 1980, yet overall child literacy rates are the same today as they were then. Class sizes are smaller – in 1980, almost 80 per cent of primary school pupils were in classes of 30 or more, falling to less than 22 per cent by 2009 – and the curriculum has been over-hauled and modernised. Yet the class of 2011 is the first generation of Irish people who do not have a better standard of literacy than their parents had.

1980 standards of literacy are not sufficient to ensure that all of our citizens are equipped with the skills necessary for the 21st century world of work, in every sector and at every level. Irish students at every level of literacy need to perform better, if they are to be available for the kinds of knowledge-intensive work Ireland is trying to attract and grow. Unless we close this gap, tens of thousands of people a year will be permanently excluded from sustainable employment, and Ireland's historical advantage of a well-educated population will be permanently eroded.

Improving literacy does not require new technology, new infrastructure, or very large sums of money. We have the ingredients for success already: a teacher in every classroom; and the means to develop literacy-rich communities through local authorities and existing community initiatives.

The final ingredient must be a national passion for literacy, and a determination that, with a joined-up, evidence-based approach, every child in Ireland will leave school with the literacy skills they need for the modern world.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

1. Too many children and young people without adequate literacy skills.

One in ten Irish children has serious difficulty with reading and writing, rising to one in three children in disadvantaged primary schools. What is more, there is worrying evidence that literacy standards among teenagers in Ireland is declining.

In 2006, Ireland ranked 5th in the OECD for literacy. However, by 2009 our rating had dropped to 17th out of 34 OECD countries. According to the most recent OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, which assess the literacy capabilities of 15 year olds in OECD countries, 17% of Irish fifteen year-olds – and as many as one in four teenage boys – lack the literacy skills necessary to function in today's knowledge-intensive society.

2. No national requirement that pupils reach an agreed standard of literacy.

While second level schools and teachers will be aware of the literacy standard of their pupils, through school-level literacy testing and classroom practice, **there is no national standard which schools are expected to meet, other than that of the official state examinations.**

However, the results of Junior Certificate English 2009 suggest that Irish pupils are able to progress through the school system, at least as far as the Junior Certificate, without reaching baseline proficiency in literacy.

If we map PISA's 2009 findings onto the Junior Cert class of 2009, of the 54,862 exam candidates that year, around 6,000 pupils scored at Level 1 in PISA. At Level 1, students are deemed not to have reached the minimum level of literacy required for pursuing further study or meeting the demands of today's workplace. However, only 153 pupils failed their Junior Certificate English exam in 2009.

3. No coherent strategy or lines of accountability.

Although the government has adopted national child literacy targets, it does not have a national strategy for achieving those targets, other than the stated aims of the primary level English curriculum.

The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Action Plan 2005-2010 stipulates that designated schools must have individual three year action plans with targets for literacy and numeracy achievement. Additional literacy-related supports are available to DEIS schools for this purpose. However, individual school-level targets are not required to have any reference to the national target. As a result, **there is no accountability for meeting this national target for disadvantaged schools, or for improving the literacy skills of pupils nationwide.**

4. Not enough focus on literacy in teacher training or continuous professional development.

“Energetic, intelligent high-quality teaching remains the best solution to our literacy problems...Good teaching results in sound learning.” International literacy expert Tim Shanahan

However, evidence from the Educational Research Centre and other experts suggests that Irish primary school teachers do not get sufficient pre-service training in the teaching of literacy, while second level teachers are not required to undertake any. Furthermore, a large minority of teachers in disadvantaged primary schools have reported that existing in-career development on the teaching and learning of literacy was of little use.

5. The high cost of failure.

Pupils with inadequate literacy are more likely to leave school early, which in turn makes them more likely to experience long-term unemployment, poverty, poor health, and to end up in prison. The personal cost of illiteracy is isolation, poverty, and disenfranchisement. The societal cost, and cost to the economy as a whole, is profound.

A study of the value of investment in literacy in the UK found that a specific reading intervention at age six would result in estimated savings to the British Exchequer of £1.37 to £1.62 billion. While comparable figures are not available for Ireland, this research points to a significant return on early investment in child literacy.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

1. Make literacy a national priority

- Labour will develop, as an urgent national priority, a **national strategy plan to improve overall youth literacy levels, with agreed national outcomes and specific targets for disadvantaged children and teenagers**, as recommended by the NESF report *Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues*.
- When resources allow, Labour will build on the existing Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme to provide a **comprehensive, regularised and universal pre-school year**, with an emphasis on clear developmental goals for pre-school children.
- **Labour will change the Education Act**, so that the National Educational Welfare Board can address absenteeism from the time a child registers for school, rather than from the age of six.
- **Labour will provide dedicated funding to stock school libraries.**

2. A 'whole child' response

- **Labour will target literacy black spots** through an area-based response to literacy. Along the model of *youngballymun*, this will involve coordinated intervention by public health officials, teachers and schools, local authorities, and non-governmental organisations to address whole-community literacy.
- **Labour will provide for literacy summer camps in disadvantaged areas** to minimise the 'summer slump' experienced by primary school pupils.
- **Labour will establish minimum size guidelines for social housing**, in accordance with the Labour Party's 'Right to Read' campaign.
- **Labour will work with local authorities to implement the party's 'Right to Read' policies**, including longer opening hours for libraries, and supporting library outreach policies, such as study zones and the 'Baby Books Bundle' to encourage new parents to read to their baby.

3. Primary Education

- **Labour will prioritise literacy across the whole school**, not just the classroom. This means that:
 - Every primary school must develop a whole-school literacy plan, with target outcomes for class groups. Schools will be given guidelines, so that their target outcomes correspond to national objectives.
 - The plan will include the sharing of literacy assessment data at school level at least twice a year.
 - Ultimate responsibility for literacy outcomes in the school will be vested in school principals. School principals will be required to participate in professional development to improve their own understanding and teaching of literacy, in order to fully enable them to support their teaching staff.

- **Labour will focus on teaching.** Along with school principals, classroom teachers will be the most important drivers of improvement in overall literacy. However, they need more support. This includes:
 - Instructing teacher training colleges to increase pre-service instruction on literacy teaching and learning.
 - Establish an advisory group of international and Irish literacy experts to provide evidence-based training for providers of pre-service training, continuous professional development, and dedicated literacy mentors. Specialist material would also be made available online for all teachers and principals.
 - Making continuous professional development in the teaching of literacy a priority for the Teaching Council and the Primary Professional Development Service.
 - Ensuring that each DEIS school has access to an experienced literacy mentor charged with the professional development of staff. These mentors would focus on capacity development among the teaching team, and would themselves be obliged to undergo continuous professional development to ensure progress continues to be made in literacy standards.

- **Labour will expand teaching time spent on literacy.** Research by the Educational Research Centre in 2003 found that disadvantaged primary schools were spending an hour per day on English, but that only 16-20 minutes of this was devoted to reading instruction. Expert evidence shows that instruction time on literacy is critical, particularly for educationally disadvantaged children.
 - In tandem with improved teaching practice, DEIS primary schools would be mandated to provide literacy instruction across the curriculum for up to 120 minutes per day. Non-DEIS schools would be mandated to provide literacy instruction for a minimum of 90 minutes.
 - This time would be divided equally between developing word knowledge, oral fluency, reading comprehension and writing. It is not required that this be a discrete block in the day; rather, schools would have discretion about how this specific literacy instruction was delivered, provided the goals and time and task were achieved. Incorporating specific literacy instruction into other subject areas will minimise the effect of expanding time spent improving reading and writing on the delivery of the rest of the primary school curriculum.
 - We will review the primary school curriculum to optimise the teaching of literacy.

- **Labour will reach out to families.** Family literacy is a key determinant of child literacy. Currently there are only 19 family literacy projects attached to DEIS schools, at a cost of €200,000. A more comprehensive approach to connecting school-based intervention, and the support available to a child at home, would improve the effectiveness of over €210 million annually being spent on educational disadvantage.

- School literacy plans will require schools to be more pro-active in demonstrating how parents can support their children. The plans will also incorporate more regular feedback to parents, both verbally and in writing, about their child's progress in literacy, both as it compares nationally and as it compares to their classmates. These plans will also provide for support by teachers for parents to develop their child's vocabulary, oral fluency, reading comprehension and writing.
- Labour's area-based approach to child poverty will incorporate family literacy and community literacy projects, according to best practice.

4. Second Level Education

There is no national standardised testing of literacy at second level. While it is more difficult, both for the pupil and the school, to address serious literacy difficulties at second level, the needs of the one in six Irish fifteen year-olds who do not have adequate literacy skills for modern life cannot be ignored.

Second level subjects can demand specific literacy skills, for example, analysing historical sources, decoding verbal mathematical problems or understanding scientific terms. Appropriate teaching of reading comprehension and writing strategies can enhance students' understanding and performance in their subjects, as well as their literacy skills.

- **Labour will get an accurate picture of literacy levels at second level.** Expand the scope of PISA to include a wider sample of 15 year olds, and use the results to inform literacy policy across second level.
- **Labour will ensure that every school draws up a literacy plan** based on its assessment of pupils at first and third year, with targets for improvement that correspond to national objectives.
- **Labour will ensure that responsibility for literacy outcomes will be vested in the school principal,** who will also receive professional training to support the implementation of the literacy plan.
- **Labour will establish panels of subject teachers to provide expert advice** on the best models of teaching subject-specific literacy.
- **Labour will incorporate instruction on the teaching of literacy into pre-service training** for second level teachers. In-service for all second level teachers will also include subject-specific instruction on how to incorporate literacy teaching into the curriculum.
- Labour will prioritise the professional development of literacy instruction skills for teachers working in DEIS schools, where **literacy instruction will be required to be integrated into subject classes.**
- **Labour will maintain the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) demonstration library project** operating in the 30 most disadvantaged DEIS second level schools.

CONCLUSION

The thirty year stasis in overall child literacy rates demonstrates the need for a radical shift in policy, specifically in the way we approach the teaching and learning of literacy.

While acknowledging the importance of parents in advancing children's literacy, ensuring that every child can read and write to the best of his or her ability, in order to benefit from their wider education, should be the first objective of the Irish school system. Not only is it morally unacceptable to abandon up to 17 per cent of our young people to a lifetime of underachievement, social exclusion and low pay caused by poor literacy – it does not make economic sense either. We cannot afford to have one in six members of our labour force without the most basic skills necessary for work in the 21st century.

Labour's plan to break through the plateau in literacy standards will cost €14 million per year, in addition to a re-orientation of existing spending on continuous professional development. This has been included in Labour's plan for fiscal stability, and represents a critical investment in Ireland's future.

Raising literacy standards is an urgent national cause, and it will be at the heart of a Labour government's strategy for education.