

# Overview of Primary-Level Education in Ireland in 2023

## Introduction

2023 has been a year of substantial change and challenge, much of which is reflected in the themes of the articles in this edition of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*. One of the realisations of recent times is that Ireland and its citizens are part of a global matrix, and that matters which we had thought were concerns for others – be it geopolitical conflict or teacher shortages – are real matters of concern for us, impinging on our daily lives in classrooms across the state.

Covid-19 demonstrated effectively how permeable borders are, and how foolish it is to expect that an event in another part of the world will not impact on us. We know that the closure of schools and the social restrictions of the pandemic have impacted significantly on children, and now their wellbeing and resilience have become the focus of much attention. We have seen that migration quickly brings the trauma associated with fleeing conflict into our classrooms, and that these classrooms are more diverse and culturally rich now than ever before.

The redeveloped Primary Curriculum Framework was launched in March 2023, while the new mathematics curriculum was published in September. These changes require strong leadership in schools and a population of high-quality teachers who are well prepared to interpret the curriculum while working in ever more complex settings. We are at a crucial point in the nation's educational journey. We can no longer assume that we will continue to have the appropriate quality or quantity of teachers and school leaders into the future, unless urgent action is taken to address these matters.



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**The educational landscape in Ireland has changed considerably in recent years, not least at primary level. This overview looks at the major themes, developments, and challenges in the sector this year, including teacher supply and shortages, curriculum change, wellbeing and mental health, and diversity and inclusion.**

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## Teacher supply

Workforce and skills planning is not a new phenomenon in Irish life. However, for many decades, the supply of teachers has been constant and predictable, and teaching has not been identified as an area where we have experienced a skills shortage. We have celebrated the fact that traditionally, teaching has attracted candidates from the top 10%–15% of Leaving Certificate students, but also that Irish teachers were competent, were respected for their contribution to society, and enjoyed a good standard of living.

In 2023 there are some constants in this profile. Initial teacher education programmes are still highly sought after and can select students from high-calibre applicants. We can boast that the quality of our teachers is very high, and that with more than 121,000 teachers registered with the Teaching Council, we have never had such a large pool of teachers. Public confidence in teachers is strong, and in a recent survey by the Medical Council, teachers ranked as the most trusted professionals in Ireland (O'Regan, 2023).

It is now widely acknowledged by the Department of Education and the Teaching Council that the most pressing issue in Irish education across all sectors today is the acute shortage of teachers. Irish teachers are recognised internationally as being of excellent quality, and, with education now a global market, schools in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Arab Emirates are benefiting from the excellent teacher education standards provided in Ireland. Understandably, younger teachers have an appetite to travel and to experience life which was much curtailed during the pandemic.

But this migration of early-career teachers does not fully explain the shortage of teachers in schools each day. The picture is more complicated. There are opportunities to job-share and to take career breaks, and there are more and better periods of parents' and parental leave, while teachers are seconded to Oide and other agencies to provide professional development. Teaching has become more challenging, and, according to a recent survey by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, nine in ten teachers are struggling with their workload (Donnelly, 2023).

The range of curriculum change and innovation, allied with the complexity of children's needs in the classroom and the challenge of meeting the high expectations that teachers and others have of their role, mean that teaching is increasingly stressful. Many are retiring early, leaving the profession they love to protect their own long-term health and wellbeing.

The landscape of teaching is further impacted by the cost of living, particularly the cost of buying a home in urban centres, especially Dublin (Sheehy, 2023). This intricate web of considerations translates into an unprecedented non-

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availability of teachers, and vacant posts across the system, with specific challenges for special and Irish-medium schools, and schools in Dublin.

## International perspectives

The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 results reveal that Ireland's 15-year-olds are the best in reading literacy in the EU and the OECD, and that they are also performing significantly higher than the OECD average in mathematics and science (OECD, 2023). These data, published in December 2023, have been the source of much celebration, suggesting that we have weathered the pandemic well and have done better than many neighbouring countries.

While the statistics illustrate that the Irish education system is doing comparatively well in an international context, it is also clear that the recent performance of our students dipped when compared to their achievement in mathematics and reading in both 2018 and 2015 PISA surveys. While it is heartening that Ireland has retained its position as a high-achieving country, standards have fallen across the board. This is not a time for complacency.

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## Free schoolbooks

Recognising the back-to-school costs, and to ensure equal access to education, the Department of Education in 2023 established a scheme to cover the cost of all schoolbooks, workbooks, and copybooks for children in primary and special schools. Schools received €96 in respect of each pupil enrolled: a total spend of more than €53 million. This groundbreaking decision by the State was much welcomed by families and brought Irish education in line with the resources provided for children in other EU states.

## Wellbeing and mental health supports

Several articles in this chapter of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* address the issues of belonging, values, mental health, wellbeing, and grief. This is not surprising, given the impact that school closures have had on children and their families, and the escalating pressures on school staff. PISA this year also delved into students' wellbeing, sense of belonging, and satisfaction with life. While 81% of students in Ireland said they make friends easily at school (OECD average: 76%), 71% felt that they belong at school (OECD average: 75%).

Meanwhile, 14% reported feeling lonely at school, and 14% felt like an outsider or felt left out of things at school (OECD average: 16% and 17%). Some 13% of girls and 19% of boys reported being the victim of bullying acts at least a few

times a month (OECD average: 20% of girls, 21% of boys). Clearly students' safety, wellbeing, and mental health are of concern, and schools are actively promoting kindness, inclusion, respect, and wellbeing through activities such as Anti-Bulling Week and are working towards the Cineáltas Flag standards.

At primary level, the Department made the landmark decision in summer 2023 to provide a two-strand programme of counselling, wellbeing, and mental health supports to primary schools. Recognising schools' elevated needs, particularly in the fallout of the pandemic, the Department has secured €5m in funding to provide in Strand One access to one-to-one counselling for children in primary schools across seven counties, via access to an approved counsellor.

In the second strand of this pilot programme, clusters of primary schools in Cork, Carlow, Dublin 7, and Dublin 16 have access to wellbeing/mental health practitioners working under the direction and supervision of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), focusing on whole-school preventative approaches to support children. While this initiative is very welcome, a comprehensive, national children's mental health strategy is required to adequately support children and their families.

Recognising the needs of all school staff, the Department established an Employee Assistance Service in 2020. However, as Brian O'Doherty's article in this chapter reveals, primary-level principals experience burnout, stress, and depressive symptoms at almost double the rates of the healthy working population, and they experience more than double the incidence of sleeping disorders and cognitive stress. When comparing the outcomes of health and wellbeing surveys from 2015 and 2022, while all scores have elevated, the percentage of school leaders reporting burnout has increased significantly.

The wellbeing of our pupils cannot be addressed in isolation; rather, steps are required to support school staff, who can provide empathy, compassion, and a nurturing environment for children only when they themselves are adequately supported.

## Diversity and inclusion

Inclusion of children with special or additional education needs in Irish schools has been a focus of investment and development for many years. Based on the premise that children are entitled to be educated in their local community, 126 new special education classes opened in September 2023, and two new special schools are to be established in 2023/24.

Budget 2023 committed to an increase of over 50% in staffing levels in the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). There are now more than 20,000 special needs assistants (SNAs) in schools, and the first SNA development plan

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has been announced; consultation has yet to begin on how SNAs' role can be envisaged to meet current and future inclusive practices in schools. While some schools have sensory rooms or nurture rooms, these resources should be available to all children, in all schools.

Increasingly our schools are more multicultural and multilingual. In October 2023 there were 17,501 Ukrainian pupils in our schools, 10,655 of them in primary schools. We know that 17% of all pupils in Irish schools are from a migrant background, many fleeing war or natural disasters. The broad spectrum of needs that children are presenting with in school underlines the complexity of school life and Irish education.

Irish education is at a pivotal point in its development. The range and nature of challenges being experienced across the system are unprecedented. A comprehensive review of the needs of the system, its children, and its teachers is required. There are big questions to be asked. Let's hope that the listening and thinking process established through the National Education Convention of 1993 might be repeated in 2024.

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