

# Challenges Facing Voluntary Secondary Schools

Takeaways from a large-scale study of the sector

## Introduction

*The Value of the Voluntary Sector in Irish Education*, a study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), explored the immediate issues facing voluntary secondary schools and longer-term questions around teaching and learning, school ethos, and school gender mix. The research, commissioned by the Joint Managerial Body (JMB), was conducted in March–April 2023 in 21 schools chosen to reflect the diversity of the sector.

In each school, Second and Fifth Year students were surveyed and participated in focus groups. Also interviewed were school leaders, guidance counsellors, special educational needs (SEN) coordinators, teachers, members of the board of management, parents, and key stakeholders in the wider second-level system.

More than 2,000 survey responses and more than 100 interviews yielded a wealth of data on important topics. The full findings will be published in 2024; in the meantime, this article will outline the main takeaways and point to immediate policy recommendations. First, it will briefly discuss what the voluntary sector looks like.

## The voluntary secondary sector

The voluntary secondary sector includes roughly half of Ireland's second-level students (215,955 of 406,392) and schools (384 of 727). It is an incredibly diverse sector: there are schools with just over a hundred students, schools with well over a thousand, and everything in between. There are urban schools, rural schools, DEIS schools, and Gaelcholáiste: the full spectrum of Irish education. A study of the voluntary sector is therefore also a study of Irish second-level education more broadly.



**Dr Eamonn Carroll**

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Education, Economic and Social Research Institute

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This article outlines key findings from an ESRI study, *The Value of the Voluntary Sector in Irish Education*, and highlights some of the main challenges facing Irish secondary schools in engaging students. It also provides an overview of the sector and makes immediate policy recommendations.

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Yet key distinctions set the voluntary sector apart from the other sectors in Ireland, and in some cases from international norms. Almost all voluntary schools have an explicitly religious ethos, the vast majority Catholic (339 out of 384), with the Church of Ireland and other minority faiths like the Quakers and Judaism also represented. Even the growing number of non-denominational voluntary schools (mostly under the patronage of Educate Together) attach great importance to their secular ethos. Voluntary secondary schools are also split between co-educational (40%), all-girls (27%), and all-boys (33%) schools, while the other sectors are effectively entirely co-educational.

Finally, while voluntary schools have a broad socioeconomic profile, historically they have drawn more from middle-class families (Smyth, 2017), and the sector includes all of Ireland's fee-charging second-level schools. The most recent data from the Growing Up in Ireland study suggests that the cohort attending each sector is converging over time, but that voluntary schools still enrol a slightly more socioeconomically advantaged cohort in terms of parental education and household income.

## Funding and finance

There is a widespread feeling among voluntary school leaders and other stakeholders that this historic gap is still being used by the Department of Education to justify what they perceive to be lower levels of funding compared to other sectors. Capitation funding was seen as nowhere near the level needed, leaving schools reliant on voluntary contributions and constraining what they could offer students. The exact level of funding received by schools across the sectors is difficult to calculate, with an opaque system further obscured by differences in what schools are actually responsible for providing, depending on which sector they are in.

In Education and Training Board (ETB; formerly vocational) schools, for example, running costs like insurance, human resources, and infrastructure are centralised, whereas in the voluntary sector they are the responsibility of individual schools or patronage bodies. The complexity of funding mechanisms is a result of the ad hoc way they have evolved in response to schools' needs and the other funding streams available: historically, patronage bodies funded their schools in various ways, but this is largely no longer the case.

Replacing current funding mechanisms with a centralised, universal formula does not seem likely or particularly desirable. However, there is clearly a need for greater consultation and communication with schools, patronage bodies, and the JMB over the exact mechanisms used and the potential for centralising and thus reducing costs like insurance.

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The area where voluntary school finances were most under pressure was infrastructure, with many schools unable to finance needed expansions or renovations. There are, of course, budgetary constraints on what can be funded in any given year, but greater transparency and clarity on how decisions are made would be welcome, while more joined-up thinking when completing multiple jobs at once or replacing facilities that require frequent costly repairs would make budgets go further in the long run. Of particular concern were inadequate facilities for STEM subjects and physical education – central features of what schools offer in 2023.

## School offerings

The question of what schools offer was at the heart of this study, and in reporting our results we aim to show the full breadth of what schools are now expected to provide and the challenges they face in doing so. The ‘core business’ remains teaching and learning, but there is a widespread understanding that learning needs to be underpinned by a wide range of other offerings and supports, inside and outside the classroom. Some of these, like extracurricular activities, are straightforward and have been provided by schools for decades, but many teachers felt they were under more pressure than ever to provide a wide enough range to engage all students and to juggle extracurricular activities with the curriculum.

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The supports most urgently needed and most difficult to provide were for student mental health and wellbeing. Guidance counsellors in many schools were overwhelmed by the level of support that students needed – a difficulty compounded by the fact that outside agencies like Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are also overwhelmed, with significant waiting lists in most areas. This leaves schools to deal with cases far beyond a guidance counsellor’s training, as well as increasing numbers of less-severe cases.

Many school staff felt that while mental health issues had been increasing for some time, these had surged after the Covid-19 pandemic. In response, a small number of schools had hired, self-funded, a part-time psychologist, and all who did so saw it as hugely positive. This approach should be seriously considered on a national level, as mental health issues in young people show no sign of subsiding, with a clear impact on students’ ability to engage fully in their education.

Two other key areas where schools felt unable to fully support students’ engagement were around SEN and socioeconomic disadvantage. Existing supports – especially for special classes, special needs assistants and resource hours, and DEIS funding and posts – were extremely welcome, but for many schools they did not meet the level of need that exists in the classroom. In particular, differentiation in mainstream classrooms was made difficult or

impossible by the number of students in the class and the pressure to cover material for state examinations, again compounded by the pandemic and uneven coverage of curricula during the school building closures.

Suitable curricula for students with complex learning needs were a significant issue. The common-level curriculum for Junior Cycle was seen to exclude some students, who previously would have taken foundation or ordinary level, while the lack of a Senior Cycle course to follow on from Junior Cycle L1 and L2 learning programmes made it extremely challenging for schools to provide suitable learning opportunities for students who completed these programmes.

The lack of dedicated funding to support students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in non-DEIS schools was another issue undermining schools' ability to fully engage all their students. While the level of need in the DEIS schools in our study was on a different level to that in non-DEIS schools, there are many students in non-DEIS schools who would greatly benefit from supports like a home school community liaison or free school meals. If all schools are to be open to and inclusive of all students, they must be properly resourced to fully support all students, whatever their needs or background.

## Conclusion

There is not space here to explore the study's findings further, especially as their scale yielded nuanced results in areas like teaching and learning in the classroom and beyond; how well Irish schools prepare young people for their adult lives; staffing challenges; stakeholder perceptions of school gender mix; and the role of ethos in the 21st-century school. The results, when published, will provide a broad and deep snapshot of the current voluntary sector, with many findings speaking to the Irish second-level system more broadly.

But the overwhelming message of the data is clear: schools are being asked to do ever more for more students. While the supports available to them have grown significantly over recent decades, they have not kept pace with the responsibilities given to schools. If Ireland wants to keep giving its young people a world-class education, and especially if it wants this education to be available to all of its young people, it needs to match aspiration with action.

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## REFERENCE

Smyth, E. (2017) *Working at a Different Level? Curriculum Differentiation in Irish Lower Secondary Education*. London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies. [www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2017-07/OPEA157.pdf](http://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2017-07/OPEA157.pdf).



*JP McManus, Brian Mooney, and Gerald Boland pictured at the All Ireland Scholarships Alumni Christmas Party in the Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin 2, in December 2023.*

The annual event celebrates scholars who have achieved the JP McManus Scholarship Award since its inception in 2008.

Each year, 125 students from across the island of Ireland receive the Award. The scholarships provide funding for the duration of the undergraduate programmes chosen by the scholarship winners.

Participation in the scholarship scheme is confined to those who attend non-fee paying schools and are in receipt of a third level of education maintenance grant from SUSI, or are in receipt of the Educational Maintenance Allowance in Northern Ireland. In excess of €42 million has been disbursed to scholarship recipients to date; over 1,600 scholarships have been awarded and over 1,300 All Ireland Scholarships winners have already graduated from university.

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