

Editorial: Education Crises, Reforms, and Funding Challenges

10 key issues facing the next government

The people have spoken at the ballot box, and in January 2025 the TDs elected to the 34th Dáil will choose a Taoiseach who will nominate Ministers with responsibility for guiding the development of all elements of our education and training system for the next five years.

The manifestos of the main political parties put an emphasis on boosting funding for the broader education sector. But what will the new government be able to deliver? Housing and the economy may have dominated the election campaign, but education and its transformative power will be key to the most pressing challenges facing Irish society.

Talking of transformative initiatives, 2024 will be remembered as the year when the decision to extend the free books scheme introduced by Minister Foley was extended to all students up to Leaving Certificate level. But eaten bread is soon forgotten, so here are 10 key educational issues that the next administration will need to focus on.

1. Delivering affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care

The manifestos of the main political parties all put an emphasis on childcare – but the scale of ambition varies. If there is one decision that could match Donogh O'Malley's in its capacity to be truly transformative, it is putting early childhood education and care (ECEC) to the fore.

Micheál Martin, in his last contribution to the outgoing 33rd Dáil, referenced the transformative effect of 'free' second-level education on his life. Will he, in his leadership of this government, do something equally



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pioneering in ECEC? It is universally accepted that the first two to three years of a child's life fundamentally shape all that follows.

The incoming administration will have an opportunity to establish a universally accessible, high-quality, public ECEC system. It could become an essential component of Ireland's social and economic infrastructure and result in wide-ranging benefits for children, families, and society.

Transitioning from the current publicly funded system – where the State contributes to the cost of providing the service – to a public system, where the State would take responsibility for delivering ECEC to all children as a right, would offer an effective way to address several interconnected issues, such as allowing both parents to participate fully in work, education, and society. The existing ECEC scheme, the 'free preschool year', does not solve this, as it is limited to three hours per day.

2. Overcoming the teacher supply crisis

Teacher supply is a key challenge facing both our primary and post-primary education systems. The Department of Education has commissioned a UNESCO team to review this, but it is not due to report until late 2026. A taxable €2,000 incentive payment for newly qualified teachers who take up full-time posts in 2025 is a small step in addressing the issue.

As reported recently by my *Irish Times* colleague Carl O'Brien, an internal Department report says there were 400 second-level teaching posts unfilled and 800 occupied by teachers not qualified in the subject they were tasked to teach – including the core subjects of Irish, English, Maths, and European languages, alongside Physical Education, Home Economics, and Guidance Counselling. The problem is most acute in the Greater Dublin region.

As Professor Teresa O'Doherty writes in her overview of primary education in this edition of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*, citing the OECD's *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* (2024):

The shortage of teaching staff is significantly more pronounced in disadvantaged schools – the difference is among the largest observed in OECD countries. The [OECD] team wrote that DEIS schools face challenges attracting and retaining staff and sometimes fail to fill positions because they may be perceived as difficult teaching environments.

The underlying problem of both the supply and cost of housing was a key issue in the general election and will determine the success or failure of the incoming government.

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There is no simple solution to staffing our essential public services in high-cost urban settings, whether in education or health or across the public service. But the chronic daily shortage of teachers in our classrooms must be addressed urgently by the appropriate incoming Minister.

3. Addressing the school funding problem

Teresa O'Doherty writes in the present *Yearbook*:

School funding (capitation, ancillary, minor works, etc.) was reduced significantly during the financial crisis, and although it has increased slightly in recent years, it remains at 2011 levels. Yet the cost of utilities (heating, electricity) has increased by an average of 35%–37% in the last two years. Inadequate funding, and stress and worry over money, are causing many principals to feel burned out and dissatisfied with their role.

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The recent OECD report on the resourcing of schools was broadly positive about the current DEIS programme, which provides enhanced funding for schools in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. However, the report recommends better targeting of resources towards those in greatest need.

The establishment of a DEIS-plus scheme was included in six of the main political party manifestos before the election. There now seems to be a consensus that there is a set of schools from the most disadvantaged areas which need enhanced support. Establishing such a scheme will serve as a mechanism to deliver additional resources.

4. Delivering on Leaving Cert reform

The Leaving Cert is 100 years old, and many parts of the curriculum are 30 or 40 years old. Two new subjects, Drama, Film and Theatre Studies, and Climate Action and Sustainable Development, are being added in 2025. Revised syllabi in Biology, Physics, Chemistry, and Business are due to commence in September 2025 for incoming Leaving Cert students.

Students want reforms, and the need to update the Senior Cycle is clear. However, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) and Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) want to pause this redevelopment work, particularly in the sciences. They claim, with much justification, that moving from an assessment system based on a terminal written paper to one with a 40 per cent project-based assessment in science subjects will create huge difficulties, given the disparity in school laboratory facilities and the training or upskilling on offer to teachers to carry out the mandatory experiments that are central to such a revised syllabus.

Allocating a minimum of 40 per cent of marks for externally assessed work by students during the two years of the Senior Cycle is a worthy goal, but its implementation requires far more resources and training than has been provided to date. The incoming Minister needs to avoid direct confrontation with a very united teaching force on this issue.

5. Meeting the demand for Irish-language schooling

We have a 20-year strategy for the Irish language (2010–2030), and we have the Gaeltacht Act (2012). Much progress has been made in providing Gaelscoileanna at primary level throughout the country, but there is an acute shortage of Gaelcholáistí – secondary schools where students are taught subjects through Irish.

Having created a cohort of young people confident and comfortable in conversing in their first official language, we are leaving them with no meaningful option to continue their education through Irish, through a lack of any local second-level options even where the numbers are present to justify opening such a school. As a result, children and young people who receive their primary education in Gaelscoileanna are meeting a dead end when attempting to continue their education through Irish. These children inevitably lose their proficiency, progression, and potential in the Irish language.

Will the incoming Minister support initiatives such as the one advocated since 2020 by the Gaelcholáiste Mhaigh Eo campaign – which aims to establish an Irish-medium second-level school in Castlebar – and other such initiatives nationwide? There are currently 664 students enrolled in Gaelscoileanna throughout County Mayo. Do these children, and thousands of others throughout the country, not have a right to an education in our first language?

The recent shortlisting of a film by Belfast's Irish-language rappers Kneecap for two Academy Awards shows us what can be achieved when commitment and passion for the Irish language are adequately resourced. Do our Belfast cousins have to show us the way, Minister?

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6. Tackling funding deficits in higher education and research

The next Minister for higher education will have to honour the outgoing government commitment to bridge a €307 million gap in core funding for higher education on a phased basis from 2025 to 2029. Budget 2025 saw the welcome announcement of a €50 million increase in annual core funding of higher education for 2025, to rise to €150 million by 2029 under Funding the Future. All the main political parties have committed to delivering on this.

The outgoing government also amalgamated Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council into a newly formed body, Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland. Established on 1 August 2024, Research Ireland now holds a mandate to oversee competitive research funding across all disciplines, ranging from science and engineering to the arts, humanities, and social sciences, and across the full spectrum from curiosity-driven to applied research.

But as Michael Horgan, chairperson of Taighde Éireann, writes in the present *Yearbook*:

With a unified funding body, Ireland can project a more cohesive identity on the global research stage, making the country a more attractive destination for international researchers and collaborative projects. Yet [. . .] balancing the needs of various research fields, evaluating interdisciplinary projects equitably, and maintaining Ireland's competitive edge in science and technology are all complex tasks that will require strategic oversight and thoughtful planning. . . .

The challenge for Research Ireland is to position our nation as a leader in research and innovation, fostering a knowledge-driven society that values not only technological progress but also the cultural and ethical insights offered by the arts and humanities.

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Investment in university research will therefore have to be a priority for the new higher-education Minister. The Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions, which saw €1.2 billion invested in research and innovation between 2000 and 2015, has been a big contributor to economic development and foreign direct investment. The end of this fund led to the depletion of research equipment and infrastructure across the university system. A programme of research investment is needed if universities are to continue to produce work-ready graduates. There is an urgent need for a new funding programme to upgrade research infrastructure.

7. Continuing to address educational disadvantage

The OECD's 2024 report on the resourcing of schools in Ireland, Teresa O'Doherty writes, 'clearly states that the fragmentation of services, and the lack of counselling, psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and so on, impacts hugely on children's capacity to learn', and 'the shortage of teaching staff is significantly more pronounced in disadvantaged schools – the difference is among the largest observed in OECD countries'.

Minister Foley took a significant first step in addressing this over Christmas 2024 when she announced a recruitment campaign for therapists to work in schools with children. The therapists will be part of the new Educational

Therapy Support Service (ETSS) established in June 2024. The campaign will see the permanent appointment of 39 occupational and speech and language therapists and five behaviour practitioners to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). These positions' previous temporary-only status made them more difficult to fill. According to the government:

ETSS therapists will work with teachers in classrooms to collaboratively design and deliver educationally relevant interventions for students with a range of needs. This will allow, for example, a teacher and an occupational therapist to explore opportunities to integrate more movement into learning to support regulation, or for a speech and language therapist to model evidence-based vocabulary strategies in the classroom.

This service is an addition to HSE [Health Service Executive] Primary Care and Children's Disability Network Teams, which will continue to offer children one-to-one appointments with therapists. The staff in the ETSS will support special schools, and this will be in addition to the government pilot for enhanced in-school therapy support in 16 special schools which was announced in August 2024 and has commenced in Dublin, Galway and Cork.

8. Expanding special-education provision

In 2024, €2.7 billion was spent in special education: just over a quarter of the Department's budget. There are now around 3,000 special education classes operating. Significant additional resources and funding have been allocated to the NCSE in recent Budgets to expand its services. In 2024 the NCSE made significant progress in recruiting additional special education needs organisers (SENOs), team managers, and advisors. It now has 120 SENOs nationwide, up from 65.

The additional therapists mentioned above will be an integral part of that expansion. As the Department of Education details, they will be embedded across the NCSE's regional team structure and will also work with school communities and, where appropriate, the National Educational Psychological Service and Health Service Executive. The Department states:

The Educational Therapy Support Service provides two strands of support:

- 1) A sustained in-school therapy for a period of 24 months, which has already been successfully used during the School Inclusion Model (SIM) pilot*
- 2) Regional therapy support which includes teacher professional learning seminars with follow-up in-school implementation support and the design and development of therapy resources with education colleagues.*

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9. Addressing access by children to inappropriate content online

How can we best protect children from harmful online content? Research indicates that many children from age eight upwards have unlimited access to such content. In my career guidance work I have observed growing stress and anxiety in children in the past 10 years, which I attribute to the effects of social media exposure at an age when children have not yet developed the psychological or emotional skills to cope with adult content.

In a world-first law, the Australian Parliament in November 2024 passed a social media ban for children under 16. The law will make platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, Reddit, X, and Instagram liable for fines of up to 50 million Australian dollars for systemic failures to prevent children from holding accounts. Companies have been given one year to implement the law.

In Ireland, Minister Foley published guidelines for parents and parent associations who wished to create and implement voluntary codes on smartphone use among primary school children. She announced an investment in phone pouches for second-level students in an effort to mitigate potential negative impacts of social media on young people's health and wellbeing. Post-primary schools have policies that aim to control the use of phones in school, but these have no meaningful effect on young people's exposure to inappropriate content or online bullying.

Ministers for Education have but one voice at the cabinet table, and Ireland has a very small input into overall EU deliberations on how to regulate social media. But history will judge how society responds to the destructive effect of social media on young minds. The whole world will watch how the Australian legislation is implemented in practice. Protecting our children must be the first priority of any incoming Minister or government.

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10. The implications of AI

Generative AI (genAI) tools such as ChatGPT are often seen as a huge challenge to our existing model of education at all levels, particularly to models of assessment, which in truth they are. But this is to miss their transformative potential for our lived experience, which they patently also have. Artificial-intelligence technology can improve quality of life, making it easier, safer, and more productive, which suggests we should embrace it.

But it's not as simple as that. Everyone with an interest in our education system, from the child entering preschool to the Minister trying to devise technological regulations, will be affected by its development, which will be transformative. How do we restructure the way we educate at all levels to integrate these

advances in technology, while ensuring that real learning is taking place and assessment methods are effective?

In my youth, teaching was about the transmission of information from the person with the knowledge to students who did not have access to it. You nominated the textbook, which the student acquired, and collectively you attempted to transfer the knowledge through teaching. You then assessed the success of the process primarily through a written exam.

Today, through search engines, a great deal of information on any possible question is instantly available. So what is the central role of the educator, and how does one assess the competence of the learner?

The Minister for Education paused the roll-out of her Leaving Cert reforms in 2024, in terms of teacher-based assessment, due to her concerns over the implications of genAI for the integrity of the process. Of all the challenges facing every new Minister with responsibility for any element of education or training over the next five years, the most challenging will be how to successfully integrate genAI technology into our education system to the benefit of learners and educators, how to upskill those involved in teaching, and most importantly how to devise methods of assessment which fairly assess students' understanding and comprehension of learned content.

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