

Education Programme for Government: A Summary

The education section of the new Programme for Government (PfG) is quite extensive at first reading, but for someone as familiar with the education landscape as I am, it reads very much like 'steady as she goes'. I read carefully through the entire documents and highlighted the proposals relevant to education which, in my opinion, required a new decision or an ongoing action of some nature. Below is a condensed list of those highlights.



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If I were in the shoes of any of the senior or junior Ministers recently appointed to implement the PfG and looked for something to get stuck into delivering, I might find that within my areas of responsibility the actions proposed had already commenced or were within the relevant department's internal consideration processes. This programme is therefore a good summation of what's currently happening across all the relevant departments and sections – which in many ways may not be seen as a negative.

What it does give incoming Ministers is the freedom either to watch the engine of education governance purr gently away, while attending all the daily conferences and other events within their brief, or to look critically at their specific areas of responsibility and ask themselves, now that they have the freedom to innovate: What fresh thinking can I bring to my area of responsibility that can have lasting benefit for Irish society?

For any incoming Minister, a leisurely review of the Yes Minister box set might give them some insight into how to actually see through to fruition any innovative initiatives they may suggest over the next few years.

Early Childhood Education

- » Publish a detailed action plan to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood education and care (ECEC) system, with State-led facilities adding capacity.
- » Explore making available an extra hour of ECEC each day in the second year of preschool.

Primary and Second Level Education

- » Continue the programme of reform of Senior Cycle.
- » Embed information and communication technologies (ICT) and coding in the curriculum.
- » Expand the teaching of modern foreign languages in primary schools.
- » Hold a convention that brings together all stakeholders in education.
- » Expand the school transport service to include 100,000 additional students by 2030, reduce distance criteria, and expand eligibility.
- » Introduce new music education hubs.
- » Expand opportunities for students to attend Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí.
- » Continue to increase the number of schools offering Physical Education (PE) as a Leaving Certificate exam subject. Prioritise the development of PE halls and sporting facilities (including yards and play areas) for schools, in conjunction with the Sports Capital Fund, to deliver for both schools and communities.
- » Reduce the general pupil-teacher ratio at primary level to 19:1 over the term of government.
- » Roll out common school-application systems nationwide to reduce stress on parents and students.
- » Increase funding supports for student teachers, working to increase supply and diversity in the profession.
- » Establish a new DEIS-plus scheme to support schools with the highest level of educational disadvantage to improve educational outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy.
- » Enhance guidance services in schools to ensure that all students have access to high-quality guidance. Provide career guidance in special schools.
- » Continue to expand and improve the free School Meals Programme and ensure that suppliers adhere to robust guidelines on the nutritional value of meals, dietary requirements of students, reduction of food waste, and use of recyclable packaging.

- » Provide free schoolbooks to all children in the free education system, and introduce changes as needed to the operation of this scheme.
- » Provide free period products in schools to ensure that no student is held back due to period poverty.
- » Continue to increase the number of special schools and special classes across the country to ensure that children can go to school in their local community.
- » Introduce a new common application system for children applying to special schools and classes to make it more straightforward for parents.
- » Create a dedicated national therapy service in education, beginning with special schools. Double the number of college places for speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, educational psychologists, and any other specialists required.
- » Create new expedited qualification routes for professionals with relevant skills and experience. Examine the provision of funding supports for those seeking to upskill into therapy programmes. Provide therapy assistant posts in the education sector to maximise therapists' ability to deliver bespoke therapy services. Ensure that the model of therapy provision allows children in special educational needs (SEN) and mainstream classes, and those in special schools, to access essential therapies.
- » Make special education modules and placements in special schools or classes a universal part of initial teacher training that will be subject to assessment.
- » Introduce a specific programme to support students with exceptional abilities.
- » In State examinations, develop an appropriate mechanism to allow additional time for students with specific needs and in certain circumstances, and also ensure that those who use assistive technology can do so.
- » Complete the special needs assistant (SNA) workforce development programme, providing clarity on their role and career paths.
- » Work with school leaders to ensure that schools are smartphone-free zones to protect student wellbeing and learning.
- » Promote digital literacy and online safety education in schools, especially through Webwise in collaboration with Coimisiún na Meán and other organisations, to ensure that children understand online safety risks and to increase supports against bullying and online abuse, and expand counselling resources.

- » Introduce a comprehensive wellness approach, focusing on physical activity, nutrition, emotional wellbeing, and positive social behaviour in schools, promoting at least 60 minutes of physical activity throughout the full day for children of all abilities.
- » Complete the passage of legislation to provide supports to survivors of abuse in industrial schools and reformatories.
- » As a priority, establish and support the work of a commission of investigation as agreed by the Cabinet in September 2024.

Further and Higher Education

- » Unlock the National Training Fund.
- » Develop a borrowing framework for technological universities to access capital funding for initiatives, including student accommodation.
- » Ensure that where a higher education institution operates across multiple campuses in a region, there is balanced senior-management representation based across the campuses.
- » Continue to reduce the student contribution fee over the lifetime of the government, to ease the financial burden on students and families at the start of each academic year in a financially sustainable manner.
- » Examine the introduction of a placement grant for students on mandatory placements.
- » Increase financial support to postgraduate students, particularly in areas of critical skills shortages.
- » Increase the number of third-level pathways outside the Leaving Certificate points system, and introduce a single application process for apprenticeships and further and higher education.
- » Introduce a 'second chance' to ensure that students repeating a year or changing courses on one occasion can access the Free Fees Initiative, to avoid them being penalised and having to pay higher rates of fees.
- » Expand the Programme for Access to Higher Education (Path 4) courses to ensure equity of access to further education.
- » Expand the CAO system to include more apprenticeship options.
- » Expand the skills categories that can avail of the National Training Fund to include sectors such as healthcare and education.
- » Grow apprenticeship registrations to at least 12,500 by 2030, and develop and launch a new five-year Apprenticeship Action Plan for 2026–2030 to set a strategic vision for the sector and expand the skills categories.
- » Work with the National Skills Council to update apprenticeship curriculums to meet today's industry standards.

- » Ensure new courses in green skills supporting Ireland's transition to a green economy, and establish industry centres of retrofitting excellence nationwide.
- » Double the number of places in high-demand healthcare professions, such as speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and physiotherapists.
- » Continue to invest in the National Construction Training Centre at Mount Lucas, Co. Offaly, to address future demands for construction skills.

Research and Innovation

- » Continue to fund Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland to maintain Ireland's global competitiveness.
- » Ensure that distinct funding programmes for research in the humanities and social sciences are maintained.
- » Work with industry and higher education institutions to provide expanded programmes of short and micro-credential courses to upskill and re-skill our pool of talented people for future jobs.
- » Enable the transformation of technological universities to more comprehensively deliver on skills and innovation by introducing new academic career paths, contracts, and professorships in TUs.
- » Strengthen all-island collaborations and continue to support the North-South Research Programme through the Shared Island Fund.

New Student Accommodation

- » Develop a multi-annual plan to urgently deliver new student accommodation, including through state-financed, purpose-built student accommodation on public or private lands.
- » Enable technological universities to borrow funds to provide for on-campus student accommodation.
- » Examine measures to boost the take-up of the Rent-a-Room relief scheme.
- » Ensure that student accommodation leases align with the academic year, making it easier for students to secure housing only for the months they need.

Evaluation of the *Time to Count* Programme



(standing L-R) Andrea Lazenby Simpson, BITCI Head of Education; Molly Fitzgerald, ESB; Orla Gallagher, ESB; Rachel Treacy, ESB; Melanie Flynn, BITCI; (seated) Authors Bernie Collins and Therese Dooley.

The *Time to Count* programme aims to build children's confidence around numbers, to reinforce their conceptual understanding around numbers, and to support them in mathematical problem solving. This is done by pairing companies with 3rd class pupils in a local DEIS school, and providing company volunteers to deliver 10 sessions with the class using maths games, activities, and challenges.

The programme has grown exponentially since it began in 2013, and is now nationwide. In 2024, up to 1000 students participated through more than 50 partnerships between businesses and schools.

Key findings from the external evaluation conducted by DCU found:

- » High level of satisfaction with the programme from all participants.
- » Teachers and volunteers were very positive about the impact of the programme on children's confidence with numbers.
- » The relationship with the volunteers was also a significant positive factor in developing social skills and confidence and in acting as role models.
- » The programme delivers on reinforcing children's conceptual understanding of numbers as well as other strands of mathematics, for example money management.
- » The programme contributes to children's perseverance in problem-solving.
- » The programme covers all strands of the Primary Maths Curriculum and recommends an expansion of the programme's objectives to include the social aspects of learning.

The *Time to Count* evaluation was conducted by Therese Dooley and Bernie Collins from Dublin City University (DCU).

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