

# Overview of Primary-Level Education in Ireland in 2024

In 2024 the Department of Education celebrated the centenary of its foundation. Over the last one hundred years there has been much to commend, as Irish children, their teachers, and schools continue to perform well above average OECD standards – not just in literacy, numeracy, and science but also in wellbeing and equity matrices. However, gaps identified recently in mathematics and science achievement by sex (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS] 2023) need to be monitored.

We have one of the highest retention/school completion rates internationally, with strong transfer rates to third-level education, and we continue to attract high-performing people to become teachers. In the primary sector, 2024 represented a period of evolution rather than revolution. There was evidence of steady progress on the delivery of many priorities identified in the Department of Education's strategic plan for 2023–2025. The *Forbairt Annual Statement of Priorities* and the quarterly progress reports published by the Department are replete with actions completed, and it is good to acknowledge how much has been achieved.

In an election year, education was not directly one of the controversial topics challenging candidates – rather, poverty and inaccessibility of housing were matters of concern. Because little airtime was given to education, and because of the general acceptance that education in Ireland is of a high standard, it could be argued that a sense of complacency has developed in the political arena and that the crises being experienced every day by parents, teachers, principals, and school communities are not that real or urgent.

In the next section I will look at some achievements in 2024, then identify essential reading which could usefully inform the next Minister about the urgent challenges to be addressed.



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The centenary of the Department of Education's foundation is an opportune moment to take stock of Irish primary education. This overview of the sector considers recent progress and achievements and, with a new government imminent, recommends some reports that will be essential reading for the new Minister in addressing the main challenges, including special educational provision, teacher supply, school finances, educational disadvantage, and principals' wellbeing.

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## Achievements to celebrate

### *Roll-out of the redeveloped primary curriculum*

Schools have embraced the new primary language and maths curricula. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has consulted widely on the draft specifications for other areas, with input from teachers, parents, and children. The recognition of teachers' agency is welcome. The shift to a learning outcomes approach relies on teachers' judgement, and, to ensure the success of this exciting curriculum, substantial face-to-face professional development should be provided for teachers.

### *Schools are inclusive and diverse communities*

The inclusion and celebration of all children is one of the hallmarks of Irish schools, whether they have additional needs or are English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) learners, migrant children, new arrivals from war-torn regions, or children who are experiencing homelessness. By February 2024 we had 11,288 Ukrainian pupils enrolled in primary schools. A report into their experiences commented positively on the quality of teaching and learning observed and commended schools for their inclusive practices, with 90% of the Ukrainian children found to be studying Irish and participating in extracurricular activities.

### *Irish-medium education policy consultation*

Public consultation took place on the development of a policy on Irish-medium education outside of the Gaeltacht. The Department commissioned a literature review on Irish-medium and minority-language education. The first report in this series presents evidence of effective practice in 10 different jurisdictions where education is provided through minority languages. This data will inform the development of the emerging policy.

### *Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Strategy*

The Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy strategy for 2024–2033 was launched in May, seeking to include all learners and their parents and teachers in supporting children's key skills in these areas. Associated with this policy was an investment of €50m in ICT (information and communication technologies) grants for schools to support digital learning. The Minister 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.

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### *Investment in special education*

Funding allocated to special education has continued to increase: €2.7 billion will be spent in special education in 2024, equating to 26% of the Department's budget. Depending on how it is spent, this level of funding could provide a significant base on which to build a more inclusive system. Around 3,000 special classes are now in operation, with six new special education schools announced during the year. An additional €11m was allocated in October to provide additional administrative deputy principal posts and a further 100 teaching posts in special schools. The revised structure of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) will result in a 60% increase in the number of special educational needs organisers (SENOs) across the country. This decision aims to create a more localised service to support families and schools.

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### Recommended reading for the Minister

One of the strengths of the Department's work and that of its agencies is that they engage in research-based policy development. By commissioning research and publishing high-quality and informative reports, they are providing a useful platform for action. The time has come for decisive action on many fronts. I have selected just six reports published this year, all freely available, which I believe are essential reading for the new appointee.

1. *Special Education in an Independent Ireland 1922–2022: Insights from a Journey Through the Century* (2024) by Emer Ring with Patrick F. O'Donovan, Maurice Harmon, and Lisha O'Sullivan, commissioned by the NCSE, provides a clear and honest appraisal of the evolution of special education provision over the last century. It identifies the advocacy of parents and litigation as drivers of policy development, giving impetus to the system to secure the educational rights of all children. Following Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018, the authors state unequivocally that segregation of special education is no longer compatible with our societal identity.

2. Following Ireland's ratification of the UNCRPD, the Minister sought policy advice from the NCSE. This much-anticipated advice, titled *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society*, was published in May 2024 and sets out how the state is progressing to fulfil its obligations under the UNCRPD. It gives a valuable insight into the current approach to addressing the urgent and ever-increasing complexity of needs in the system, advocating for a process that requires time and the establishment of a planning group to identify the steps in this multi-year plan, which should be piloted in several schools. There are many worthy recommendations, but no immediate actions.

3. *Education Indicators for Ireland* (March 2024) is an in-depth source of data underpinning every aspect of education in Ireland and is a must-read for the new Minister. It is impossible to do justice to it here, but the following figures on special educational needs (SEN) are illuminating:

	2018	2022
Children in special schools	7,722	8,424
Children in special classes in mainstream primary schools	6,229	10,123
Children with SEN using school transport	12,751	16,401
Special needs assistants (SNAs) in special schools	2,521	2,900
SNAs in primary schools	9,309	12,242
Students with direct involvement from NEPS psychologist (primary and post-primary casework) *	8,561	7,211
Days dedicated to support and development activities in schools (primary and post-primary) by NEPS psychologists	5,285	5,312

\* *The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) supports the wellbeing, academic, social, and emotional development of all learners. NEPS prioritises support for the wellbeing and inclusion of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and those with special educational needs.*

It is clear that resources are being invested in special education classes, special education schools, and particularly SNAs. But most children with additional needs are in mainstream classes, where class sizes are large, students' learning needs are increasingly complex, and the expectations on teachers to address these needs are escalating. In light of the limited availability of NEPS support and the absence of adequate therapeutic and behaviour supports for schools, the elevated expectations on teachers increases their already heavy workload. It also negatively affects their wellbeing and that of school leaders, on whose shoulders the responsibility rests.

Also notable is the number of children transported by bus or taxi to schools away from their home locality to access special education classes or schools. The normalisation of segregating children based on their abilities – that our most vulnerable children are leaving their homes in the early morning to travel to schools that can provide an appropriate education – must be addressed immediately.

Teacher supply is a crisis in Irish schools, and these figures illustrate why:

	2018	2022
Teachers in mainstream primary classrooms (full-time equivalents)	22,747	23,596
Other primary teachers*	14,594	18,027
Children in primary school	567,772	558,143
Children in DEIS schools	110,969	153,790

\* These include special education teachers, English language teachers, support teachers, administrative principals, and home school community liaison (HCSL) teachers, as well as any other full-time teaching staff.

While the number of children in DEIS schools has increased by 39% from 2018 to 2022, the number of mainstream teaching posts has increased by just 3.7% in the same period. Equally, the number of posts belies the number of teachers needed to fill these posts. The level of outflows of teachers due to various leave options, which are common in all Irish workplaces, translate into a much higher number of qualified teachers required.

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The Department has commissioned a UNESCO team to review teacher supply, which will probably not report until autumn 2026. In the interim, there is plentiful data available to (a) recognise the actual levels of demand, (b) support an immediate increase in the number of teachers being educated, and (c) take urgent action to retain teachers in the system and attract back those who have emigrated.

4. My fourth recommended reading is the *Survey on School Finances* by the Catholic Primary School Managers' Association (CPSMA), published in May 2024. The state invests less than the OECD average in education. Our schools are highly efficient, ensuring that our children are attaining learning outcomes on a parallel with those of Finland, for example, against whom we are often benchmarked, despite our much lower rates of investment. A recent CPSMA survey provided evidence of the financial circumstances of primary schools. Completed by 1,440 primary principals, it found that more than 70% of schools have fallen into deficit over the past year and are maintaining schools from scarce cash reserves. 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. An increase in the student capitation, to reflect that available to second-level schools, is urgently required.

The OECD's *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* (2024) examines the day-to-day experiences of children, families, and their schools. It explores the complex range of children's educational, mental, and physical needs in our schools and 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.

The rise in the level and complexity of children's needs experienced in DEIS schools, and the level of support that schools are expected to provide in the absence of other supports, places huge pressure on teachers and schools to deliver a holistic education, which addresses not only children's learning but also their wellbeing. The shortage of teaching staff is significantly more pronounced in disadvantaged schools – the difference is among the largest observed in OECD countries. The review 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.

This report sets out enriching opportunities that would strengthen learning opportunities for all children, such as breakfast clubs, after-school sports activities, and music clubs. It argues that we need to ensure that highly disadvantaged students can have the same access to these resources, regardless of their enrolment in DEIS or non-DEIS schools. The authors write:

*Resources appear to lack coordination in how they deliver support to the students that need it. It would be important, for all of the relevant government Departments of Health, Education and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to collectively deliver on a joint policy, such as is the "Young Ireland 2023-2028" policy framework. Aligning adequate supports and resources for children with additional need, while simultaneously working to improve the system of support, so that barriers to access are removed, is fundamental. (p.32)*

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5. My final recommended reading is the *Sustainable Leadership Project: Progress Report*, published in November 2024 by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN). Based on independent research by a team from Deakin University, this report describes the negative impact of workloads and the work environment on primary principals' wellbeing. The IPPN's 2024 report *Irish Principals' and Deputy Principals' Health and Wellbeing* reveals that the levels of burnout and stress experienced by principals are double those of the healthy working population. Schools' effectiveness and children's outcomes depend on the capacity of principals. Urgent, substantive, and meaningful action must be taken to support our school leaders.

Other areas, such as school patronage, also need reform. Prof. Áine Hyland's 10-year review of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022* would provide context for the Minister.

Our incoming Minister needs to have an ambitious vision for Irish education. They might get inspiration from these reports, but equally they might look back at the Proclamation of Independence from 1916, which committed to 'cherishing all the children of the nation equally'. Our early politicians recognised the education system as the foundation block of our society. The Minister might also take inspiration from the 1960s, when the *Investment in Education report* spurred radical reform of the system.

But the Minister needs to have the courage to take action rather than commission more reports. The data does not lie, and we have plenty of data. In an era when Ireland has the financial capacity to do so, we need the Minister to embrace the Department's mission, 'to ensure that all children and young people have access to a positive learning experience to realise their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, economic and cultural development'.

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### **Over 400 primary schools nationwide were recognised for their participation in science, technology, engineering and maths.**



Pictured with Minister O'Donovan are two 1st class pupils from Kilbehenny National School, Co Limerick.

On 14 June 2024, Patrick O'Donovan TD, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, announced SFI Curious Minds awards for 419 schools nationwide for their efforts in science, technology, engineering and maths.