

Opening Remarks to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills

School Costs, Facilities and Related Matters

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INTO welcomes the opportunity to address the Committee on this matter. Issues relating to school buildings were on the agenda of our first Congress, held 150 years ago this month, and are a legitimate concern of teachers, who are entitled to a decent place of work, and who want to work in buildings which enhance the educational experience of the children they teach. Such buildings are comfortable, bright, adequately heated and ventilated and have appropriate furniture and technology.

Planning for school places is not an exact science. We acknowledge that the DES uses demographic tools effectively to show areas of population growth to meet demand. However, the unique structure of primary education in Ireland means that parents can exercise their right to enrol their child in the school of their choice, be it in another area, or in a school of a different ethos. This can lead to some schools being full to capacity, while others have empty classrooms. Consultation and cooperation at local level, and clear and transparent criteria for decisions are essential if school places are to match demand.

DES planning for school places must also take into account that according to the OECD, Ireland already has class sizes which are 5 above the EU average. If we want to have the best education system in the world, we need to plan to reduce class size and provide the accommodation to do so.

40% of additional school places are delivered by extending existing schools. Schools need to be maintained and improved. As the day to day managers of schools, hard pressed principal teachers carry the burden of responsibility and additional work when projects are undertaken. The DES needs to ensure that appropriate supports are in place to enable such works to be carried out efficiently, including additional release time for teaching principals, and sufficient ancillary staff.

Primary schools struggle to make ends meet with capitation funding significantly less than that at post primary level. The Minor Works grant, which is intended for routine maintenance and upkeep of schools is an essential part of a school's budget. Yet the DES does not provide any certainty in relation to its payment from year to year. The payment of this grant must be confirmed on an annual basis, and certainty given on the timing, so that schools can plan their budgets.

In a letter to the founder of INTO, Vere Foster, in 1872, the Ennis Teachers' Association described the transformation of a "miserable hovel, on a bleak mountainside" to a school with whitened walls, a slated roof and handsome glazed windows. They described the pupils "rapt delight" at their new surroundings, and how the teachers "labor, if not easy is at least tolerable". Investment in good quality school accommodation, improves the quality of teaching and learning today, as it did in 1872.