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NPCpp – Working towards a better education system for all

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee of Education and Skills on the topic of the cost of sending children to school, the level of the Capitation Grant payable to primary schools and voluntary post-primary schools and whether this Grant is sufficient to minimise the need for additional financial contributions by parents/guardians.

Committee members,

The National Parents Council post primary (NPCpp) is grateful to the joint Committee for the opportunity to make this opening statement on foot of our earlier submission on behalf of students attending post-primary schools in Ireland and their parents.

NCPpp firstly wish to applaud the current ambition of Minister Bruton and the DES to make Ireland's Education and Training service the best in Europe by 2026 and we assure those involved of our support towards achieving this goal.

While our students can avail of some deserved relaxation and holiday time during the summer, the early weeks of July very quickly pass for parents as the planning to meet the expenditure currently required to see their children through school must be addressed.

The end of August is an expensive time for all parents with children in education – whether at Primary, Post-Primary or Third level and the costs of uniforms, books, annual 'voluntary' contributions and the many other 'educational expenses' to be covered looms large for all families.

The aspiration of our national 'free education' system, as it currently operates, is, sadly, far from free and the costs for parents and families continue to create a most stressful experience throughout the year, but particularly at the end of our Summer as each new school year looms.

The costs involved in attending school have become one of the biggest worries for parents at back-to-school time.

The Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU) national survey 2018, in fact, indicates that almost 70% of parents say that back-to-school costs are a financial worry and funding these is **THE** biggest concern for almost 50% of families.

The survey also confirms that 36% of families will actually end up in debt to meet these costs and 15% will actually cut their spending on food in order to pay them!

Directors: P. Rolston, P. Beddy, E. Bell, S. Bennet, J. Carr, B. Dennehy, M. Fanning, R. Hemeryck, D. Hogan, C. Kelly, R. MacMahon, A. Mulligan, H. Macken, G. O'Hara, S. O'Riordan, M. O'Shea, N. Keenan, R. Callan.

President: Geoffrey Browne, **Company Secretary/Director:** Michael Mulry.

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Every year the same items top the list of back to school costs and NPCpp continues to highlight the main offending categories.

The cost of books stubbornly remains the most expensive single item despite most schools endeavouring to offer book rental or similar schemes. The ongoing 'new edition' scenario, together with 'once only use' workbooks that leads to families and others being unable to utilise older sibling's books must be addressed by the authorities with publishers and suppliers.

While we appreciate that some limited success has resulted from the efforts to reduce the cost of school uniforms this has almost been offset by the rising cost of Gym gear.

The increasing cost of sports kit together with the continually high charge for extra-curricular activities are also of particular concern to NPCpp.

We attended a Joint Oireachtas Committee session on Childhood Obesity only recently at which all parties were anxious to see efforts to promote healthy exercise and activities amongst our youth. We suggest with the current national concern for the health and welfare of our children and a drive to have our teenagers become active away from tv, internet screens and rooms inside their home, extra-curricular activities at school should be a priority. They should be supported and funded as such.

Reduction and withdrawal of funding by the DES, particularly around the near collapse of the Irish economy almost a decade ago has seen insufficient funding of many activities in our schools.

Costs to maintain the fabric and function of our schools along with most of the 'holistic' aspects of educating our children - through extra-curricular activities – has not been funded by the DES but directly by parents.

Ever-increasing so-called 'Voluntary Contributions' are in most cases no longer 'voluntary' but effectively compulsory despite the directive banning this by the DES.

NPCpp consistently and frequently receive calls from distraught parents to report that their children have been denied lockers at school, not allowed to participate in TY or some other school activity or similarly penalised because their parents were unable to pay 'the voluntary contribution'.

All of these matters apply across the broad range of post primary schools in Ireland. In relation to the specific request for our views on

"the level of the Capitation Grant payable to voluntary post-primary schools and whether this Grant is sufficient to minimise the need for additional financial contributions by parents/guardians" – It is not!

Voluntary secondary schools

Through our constituent bodies, NPCpp represents parents from post primary schools including a large proportion of voluntary schools.

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Voluntary secondary schools may be fee-paying or non-fee-paying. Non-fee-paying schools that participate in the free education scheme get a range of grants and subsidies from the State.

The level of the Capitation Grant payable to voluntary post-primary schools

- The level of Capitation grant allocated to this sector was €345 in 2010 and for 2018 is €296 – a reduction of €49.00 per student.
- There are over 200,000 students in the schools in this sector, indicating that the reduction of funding amounts to circa €10ml annually, while the running costs of schools have continued to increase apace.

In addition, schools have still not returned to pre-cutback levels with regard to Pupil Resource Teacher (PRT) provision and Special Needs provision – compounding the difficulties schools face.

Traditionally schools in the voluntary secondary sector have to access on average 30% of their finance through voluntary funding (invariably PARENTS!), which is (as established by an ESRI report in 2013) disproportionate compared to other school sectors.

<http://www.erst.ie/uploads/ESRI-Report-Summary-Booklet-Final-18th-October-2013.pdf>

One of the main reason for this is that the Boards of Management of Voluntary Schools have to pay the first €562.50 of each teacher's salary (called a 'salary grant'), which for a school with an average of 30 teachers amounts to €16,875. In total this amounts to somewhere north of €7ml annually.

For the Voluntary Secondary sector, the inequity of funding is the primary reason why these schools have had to introduce a voluntary contribution scheme – contrary to the spirit of 'free education for all' – and when coupled with the 'real' costs of sending a child to school, is a serious challenge to parents to find funding.

The time has now come for the funding to be made available for equalisation and it should begin by eliminating the salary grant.

Parents have played their parts in many ways throughout the economic downturn and during the recent recovery.

Families have striven to support their children, the schools they attend – and indeed the Governments and DES - during the austere times. It is now time for things to be reversed and for adequate funding for **all** our schools to be provided by the state.

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Parents have effectively stepped in to support the state's obligations towards the education of our children. Savings for the state have been achieved 'on the backs' of the parent body.

There are basic requirements – such as school lockers, stationery (even schoolbooks!) – that should be, and must be, readily available to all students in all schools. These are an integral part of educational requirements and should be fully funded by our education system and not by individual parents.

In conclusion, NPCpp wish to re-iterate our support of the ambition for Ireland to have the best education system in Europe by 2026. We believe that, as parents, we have more than demonstrated our commitment to education during the past decade by funding many of the activities and requirements listed above – inflicting a significant burden and stress on many families.

We also believe that to achieve the desired result by 2026, the state needs to properly fund all aspects of schooling and we request that this is addressed as a matter of urgency.

As demonstrated, parents are not to be found wanting when it comes to our children's education, but there are matters and activities outside school that we must also address and our funds can be utilised better when we can support our children in these once the state 'steps up to the mark' and retakes ownership of the supports and costs required by schools.

Parents have and will continue to assist towards securing the best education for their children. We look forward to being a part of the best education and training system in Europe.

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