

CPSMA opening statement – School Costs

On behalf of CPSMA, I would like to thank the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills for the invitation to present to the Committee on school costs.

It is important to stress that school costs for parents are mainly determined not by schools, but by Government. The persistent and unconstitutional underfunding of the primary school system has led to a situation where the basic cost of running primary schools is now subvented to the tune of €46m a year by parents.

For the Committee's information, CPSMA has always advised schools that voluntary contributions are, in fact, voluntary. Schools are aware that some parents are not in a position to compensate for State underfunding by making a voluntary contribution. Schools are sensitive to this issue and we encourage parents to speak with their school principal if they have any concerns.

CPSMA has noted a tendency among some commentators over the last few weeks to blame primary schools for back to school costs. The reality is that primary schools have as much impact on the cost of returning to school as small farmers have on the price of meat in a supermarket.

The power to raise or lower the cost of going to school lies not with primary schools, but with Government and the Department of Public Expenditure.

While the Committee is focused at these hearings on the impact of school costs on parents, my focus is on the impact of underfunding on both schools and parents.

I would be failing in my duty if I did not alert the Committee to our growing concern that persistent underfunding of primary schools now poses a potential threat to the quality of education our children receive. Time spent by principals focused on an ever growing burden of administration and fundraising is time not spent leading teaching and learning. The restoration of the full capitation grant is needed as a matter of urgency and as a first step to the proper funding of the primary education system.

I refer the Committee to our full submission in relation to the specific issues which the Committee are considering. However, I would like to specifically mention the Textbook Rental Scheme at this time.

Textbook Rental Schemes

The concept of Textbook Rental Schemes was, in fact, developed by primary schools prior to being embraced by Government through a formal scheme in 2013.

The Textbook Rental Schemes operated by schools have assisted parents with back-to-school costs and created greater accessibility to textbooks for all pupils.

The continued funding of textbook rental schemes is an ongoing concern for schools who wish to utilise a variety of different textbook schemes, support the implementation of the new curriculum and replace textbooks which have been subject to natural wear and tear. CPSMA submit that further funding, in the form of an enhanced Annual Book Grant, is required in this regard for all schools.

The operation of a textbook rental scheme is both an organisational and time-intensive process which is carried out by a voluntary group of parents, school staff or a combination of both. Oversight and organisation of the scheme is an additional task for school management. Given the continual workload increases placed upon school principals, leadership teams and boards of management, CPSMA call for the immediate restoration of Leadership and Management posts to pre-moratorium levels.

Finally, I would like to make the point that our primary schools are local schools run by local, voluntary boards of management who are aware of the financial pressures faced by parents in their local communities and consequently make every effort to reduce the costs of school.