

Opening Statement

Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

10, April 2024

Key Issues Facing the Department of Education

Opening Statement for Minister Foley

Introduction

Cathaoirleach, I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to attend before you today to discuss some key issues facing the Department of Education.

Plans for Special Education

Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education is a priority for this Government. The majority of children with special educational needs are supported to attend mainstream classes with their peers. Where children with more complex needs require additional supports, special classes and special school places are provided.

In recent years, several strategic initiatives were introduced to plan and provide sufficient special class and special school places.

These initiatives are bearing fruit with almost 1,300 new special classes sanctioned and seven new special schools established during the lifetime of this Government.

In the 2024/25 school year, 14,600 Special Education Teachers will support mainstream classes - the highest number ever. The Special Education Teaching (SET) allocation model for 2024/25 is based on information from all 4,000 schools in the country, and seeks to allocate these teaching posts to schools in as fair and transparent manner as possible.

SENOs

An additional €13 million has been provided for the expansion of NCSE services. This includes an increase of 60% in SENO posts.

Mental Health Supports in Schools

My Department is committed to supporting children and young people's wellbeing to give them the best chance of being happy in school and reaching their full potential.

I have secured an additional €5million to provide a landmark programme of direct counselling and wellbeing supports in almost 650 primary schools, complementing the excellent work being undertaken by schools and other organisations.

School Transport Review & School Bus Escorts

School Bus Escorts play a vital role in supporting children with special educational needs in their journey to and from school.

The largest ever review of the School Transport Scheme, *School Transport 2030*, was published in February last. A series of changes will take effect this September including a new pilot project for post-primary pupils travelling to school on public bus routes and reduced distance criteria. Overall, our ambition is to have 100,000 additional students benefitting from School Transport by 2030. There will be an increase in the special transport grant, which goes to families who prefer to provide their own transport for their children with special educational needs or where there isn't a service available.

The terms and conditions and pay rates of the around 4,000 school bus escorts will be reviewed by the end of this year.

Integration of Immigrants with reference to English as an Additional Language (EAL)

All migrant children can access education in a manner similar to Irish nationals, until they are 18.

My Department has prioritised enhancing English as an Additional Language to support students' integration and academic achievement. 1,743 primary and 493 post-primary schools are now receiving EAL teaching resources.

STEM in Irish Education with reference to Inclusion, Diversity and Female Participation

There is a need to increase the uptake of STEM subjects and enhance STEM learning for learners of all backgrounds, abilities, and gender, with a particular focus on uptake by females.

The 2022 Gender Balance in STEM Recommendations has informed the *STEM Education Implementation Plan to 2026*.

The actions identified consider the findings of a robust consultation process and provide for the continued progression and increased take up of STEM subjects by learners from all backgrounds, abilities, and gender.

Senior Cycle and Junior Cycle reform of non-exam curriculums

Work is ongoing on the reform of non-exam curriculums, as work also continues in an intensive manner on subjects which are part of formal assessment.

The work of developing updated, inclusive and age-appropriate curricula in SPHE, is an important Programme for Government commitment.

An updated SPHE curriculum for Junior Cycle was introduced in schools across the country in 2023. An updated SPHE curriculum for Senior Cycle was approved by the NCCA in March and is with my Department. Both incorporate RSE.

A draft Wellbeing specification for Primary, including SPHE, was published for consultation in early March.

Senior Cycle Reform with reference to Revised Curriculum Specifications

In September 2023, I announced an acceleration of Senior Cycle Redevelopment, bringing forward the rollout of new and revised subjects so that the maximum number of students will experience the benefits of redevelopment as early as possible.

This is an unprecedented programme of modernisation of various curricula – moving at pace but also leveraging the learnings of previous reforms and harnessing the necessary expertise.

Current & Future Plans for the School Building Unit

With a record level of investment, the School Building Unit is leading on a major expansion of capacity in our school estate, facilitating a significant increase in special educational needs provision, upgrading, and modernising our school infrastructure.

My Department has a large pipeline of projects for delivery, including approximately 300 projects at construction. Projects at construction involve a total State investment of over €1.2 billion and include 31 new school buildings. There are also close to 90 projects currently at the tender stage including a further 28 new school buildings.

A recent agreement on new medium term capital allocations allows us to move forward on plans to address a significant level of need across the school system.

Conclusion

I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to attend today and to discuss these issues with you.