

**Workers' Party Submission on New Startegy for
Education and Skills 2016-2018**

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1. How well does the Education service meet the needs of children and students?

1(a) What improvements can be made within existing resources

An education system reflects the dominant ideology of the society in which it is based. It reflects the values of the dominant class and it is a useful lens through which to analyse class and power structures and the tensions and power struggles inherent in that society.

An education system is also a good barometer of how truly egalitarian that society is. It is a powerful predictor of life chances. How well one succeeds in the education system will determine one's pathway in later life.

The Irish education system is a very uneven playing pitch. Its most striking feature is the huge discrepancy that exists between schools, at both primary and second level. This discrepancy is reflected in school ethos, the extent to which schools are welcoming of children from different cultural backgrounds and children with special needs, the profile of the socio and economic background of pupils, the manner and extent to which schools are resourced as well as the sporting and academic resources available to students. This has a defining impact on the educational progress of children and young people and on the transfer rate of students from different schools to university. In particular it is reflected in the social patterns that exist in relation to access, participation and retention rates at third level.

Our so-called meritocratic system has allowed for a limited amount of social mobility but has failed in its objective to provide equality of opportunity for all. It is highly competitive and points driven, and is based on the assumption that everyone is starting from the same point, and that all students have the same chance to succeed if they make the effort. This so-called meritocratic system is in reality inherently discriminatory, being designed to maintain and reinforce the class structures that exist in our society. It is a selective system which allows for some to get through the hoops and for others to be left behind. Success is not determined by ability per se but to a much larger extent by the advantages bestowed by one's place in society.

1(b) What improvements can be made through new provision

In reality only lip service is paid to the concept of equality of opportunity. If we are really serious about equality then radical steps will have to be taken to neutralise the impact of the social, economic and cultural factors which dictate the parameters of our education system. Such steps will involve the ending of a selection process which perpetuates the circle of privilege. Education must be seen as a right and not a market commodity that can be bought by those who have the

means to do so. Such market commodities include being able to obtain a place, paid for by the tax payer, in a top performing league table school, together with expensive after school and weekend grinds. While those grinds are outside the reach of the less well-off, they provide for those who can afford them the necessary skills to compete successfully in the high points-driven leaving cert examination.

In-school supports, at both primary and second level, must be dramatically improved in schools welcoming of children from lower socio economic backgrounds and children with special education needs. Out-of-school supports must be available to those students if we are to enable all our young people compete on an equal footing. This calls for a huge expansion of homework clubs to build on the skeleton network that's provided at present by SCP and community groups. Extra tuition, including one to one support, must also be made available to all students who require extra help and should not be the preserve of those who can afford it.

2. Comment on work currently being undertaken by the Department in your area of interest and/or expertise. (What are we doing well, what could we do better)?

The Department must challenge the manner through which the education system serves the interests of a powerful elite; it must challenge the ideological attacks on the concept of universal education by successive governments; it must challenge funding by the tax payer of private fee paying schools, the growth of private-profit making cramming schools, the burgeoning private third level sector and the privatisation of research.

Private schools, which deny access to pupils either through the imposition of fees or because of intellectual ability, should not have the salaries of teachers and support staff paid for through taxation.

3. Are there opportunities (e.g. new areas of work) which the Department should consider when developing the 2016 - 2018 strategy which would advance the achievement of our mission, vision and objectives across the continuum of education and skills?

The state should cease to support fee-paying schools through state grants or taxation mechanisms as they actively discriminate against the vast body of the population.

Schools which have received state money in the past should be obliged to open up their schools to all students or to pay back the money.

Fee paying schools should be obliged to put facilities in place without state funding to support their students with special needs.

Tax revenue saved through such measures should be expended on the educational needs of students from less well off economic backgrounds through additional supports not already outlined in the Programme for Government. Such supports to include extra teachers (including learning, home school liaison, EAL and traveller support teachers), SNAs and out-of-school supports such as homework clubs and extra tuition and expansion of the SCP.

Voluntary contributions should be made illegal as from September 2016.

4. How should success on achieving our strategies be measured.

We can only consider that strategies have worked when the glaring differences that exist between schools and student levels of achievement have been eliminated.

5. Comment on any issues relating to the continuum of education and skills, in addition to your particular area of interest and/or expertise

The programme for The New Partnership Government 2016 recognises that “*Education is the key to giving every child an equal opportunity in life*”. It also acknowledges that “*too many of our children still fall through the cracks, and are in danger of being left behind*”. However, the manner in which it proposes addressing this issue is far from radical and much too limited in scope. The philosophy of education as outlined in the Programme is seriously flawed. This is underpinned by the language used and the manner in which its priorities are stated. Its solutions are inextricably linked to the whims of the economy rather than recognising the right of all to an education which allows people to reach their true potential. It considers investment in education as 'a prime way' “*to grow our society and economy in tandem*”. This sentence is a mixture of cliché and banality and is without meaning. The programme's declaration that investing in education “*improves human capital, thereby generating wider benefits for our economic and jobs growth and competitiveness, as well as ensuring that all our people have opportunities to achieve their potential*” reduces education to short-term economic utilitarianism.

6. Any other observations that you would suggest the Department should consider in the formulation of our strategy for education and skills 2016 - 2018

Investment in education should be ring-fenced. Its most vulnerable sections – traveller education, English as a second language, DEIS including School Completion Programmes, and special needs education should never again become the target of the vicious cuts experienced since 2009.

1. Prioritising Early Years

1(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

Numerous studies have highlighted the fact that high quality early childhood education, where a key emphasis is on language enrichment, is an essential factor in dictating how children from disadvantaged backgrounds will progress in the primary school. From a Workers' Party perspective the Programme for Partnership Government fails to deal specifically with the important role that early childhood education plays in disadvantaged communities.

1(b) How should progress on Prioritising Early Years be measured?

The success or otherwise of early intervention will be reflected in the ability of children to access the primary school and later the secondary school curriculum. In the final analysis it will be reflected in the social patterns relating to access, participation and retention rates at third level.

1(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

Early childhood education must be considered as a critical component of a comprehensive childcare system which is developed around the needs of families living in less well-off communities. When public subventions to community crèches were cut during the recession the impact was felt overwhelmingly in communities which were already struggling. As most parents who sent their children to those crèches relied on grants to help pay the cost they were unable to send their children to the crèche when the grant was cut. In some incidents those cuts led to the closure of the facilities in poorer communities, while in other incidents the cuts led to a shortening of opening hours and reduction in the number of children attending the facilities.

The Workers' Party calls on the new government to recognise the importance of a high quality and affordable childcare system to children from disadvantaged communities. A comprehensive childcare system would not only cater for the educational development and needs of the child but it would also afford parents, who themselves may have dropped out of school at an early age, an opportunity to return to the education system.

2. Tackling Disadvantaged

2(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

According to the CSO 2015 statistics one in eight of our children live in consistent poverty and 37% suffer deprivation. Many of those children lack basic necessities and come to school hungry and undernourished. In our system they are expected to compete with those who can afford to buy the necessary skills to compete successfully in the high points driven leaving cert examination, those who can afford a place in a top performing league table schools together with expensive after school and weekend grinds.

While the Programme for Government's plan to publish a new School Completion Strategy, as well as an updated Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, and to examine additional supports for groups working with Early School Leavers is to be welcomed such measures amount to little more than pious aspirations regarding tackling the issue of education disadvantage. It is all very fine talking of increasing the mandatory schooling age to 17. However, this fails to take on board the reasons why young people, many of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds, drop out of school at a much younger age than their cohort. It fails to recognise that 'school refusal' has become an ever increasing issue, even for some primary school children. It fails to acknowledge that approximately 60% of students from lower social economic backgrounds do not attend DEIS schools. While it accepts that many students outside of DEIS could benefit from such support it gives no indication that the new government envisages expansion of DEIS services including the home school liaison teacher service and the School Completion programme. The SCP has been the victim of serious cutbacks during the recession and the precarious nature of the employment conditions of its staff leaves many of the programmes very vulnerable to closure. A recent ESRI report illustrated how vital SCP is in tackling inequality in the education system. However, neither the SCP nor the Home School liaison teacher service has the capacity to extend into non DEIS schools without dramatic expansion of those services.

The Programme for Government also fails to take on board the serious financial circumstances of schools in less well-off areas which are unable to pay basic heating, lighting and insurance costs.

2(b) How should progress on Tackling Disadvantaged be measured?

Progress can be considered to have taken place:

When all children and young people, regardless of social or economic background, can reach their true academic potential

When pupils'/students' academic progress is on a par across schools

When ability to do honours subjects doesn't depend on the school you attend

When Boards of Management in less well-off communities have sufficient funding to cover running costs

When students don't feel humiliated that they haven't the money to pay for so called 'voluntary contributions', books, iPads etc

When all students feel that that they have an equal chance to compete.

When results aren't based on the availability of grinds for others of their cohort and yet denied to them because of inability to pay.

When children from the travelling community automatically transfer from primary to second level.

When children and young people with special needs have access to an inclusive education system in a school of their choice and where they are facilitated to reach their true academic potential

When students from less well-off communities have equal access to, as well as equal participation rates and retention rates, at university with their better off peers.

When background doesn't dictate the type of third level course one registers for. Research highlights how students from less well of backgrounds are much less likely to end up on honours degree and post graduate courses.

2(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

Development of a comprehensive early-childhood education system with an emphasis on language enrichment as well as the provision of wrap around community childcare services.

Childcare facilities and financial resources should be put in place to enable parents to return to second chance education.

Expansion of DEIS services to all schools catering for children and young people from disadvantaged background. This includes the expansion of the Home School Liaison teacher service as well as the School Completion Programme.

Adequate funding and proper resourcing of schools in less well-off communities

Schools receiving state funding should be totally free. Schools should not be allowed to ask students to pay for iPads and other expensive items

Removal of taxation mechanisms which allow schools in better off areas, and whose students come from wealthier backgrounds, to avail of tax rebates and thus fund extra teachers, supports and facilities which are not available to schools in less well-off communities.

The state to cease the payment of teacher and support staff salaries in fee-paying schools. Revenue saved to be redirected to state schools to tackle disadvantage.

The adequate supporting and resourcing of special needs education.

Recognition of the role that transport costs play in school non-attendance and the development of a

free school transport system.

Breakfast clubs and school meals should be available to all students

That adequate arrangements are made to ensure that children and young people whose family lose their family home are enabled to continue in their existing schools until settled in alternative permanent accommodation.

Family income supports such as Child Allowance are crucially important to those on lower incomes. Such supports must be at an adequate level. Education supports such as Back to School Allowance should be adequate to meet the full cost of the student.

Funding of Education in general

Education should be free to all, including migrant students and asylum seekers, from pre-school through to and including post-graduate studies, with all educational requirements, including books and IT equipment, provided free at primary and post-primary level and adequate maintenance grants/incomes provided to students in higher and further education and students returning to education.

Financial and learning support, including all the necessary supports required by people with disability, should be available to facilitate young people and adults re-enter the education system at any stage during their lifetime.

The learner/teacher ratio at all levels from pre-school to third level should be such as to make learning a quality, accessible, supported, inspiring and meaningful experience. No primary school class should have more than 20 pupils.

All students should have access to up-to-date science and technology, language, ICT, music, and sporting facilities and those with exceptional potential should have access to facilities which will give them the opportunity to pursue and develop this potential.

Comprehensive and properly-funded supports should be put in place to facilitate students with special needs, those in danger of dropping out, or students at risk of not achieving their potential. SNA support should be based on academic as well as care needs.

No work in the education system should be of a precarious / non paid intern / JobBridge nature.

3. Diversity and Choice for Parents

3(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

UN human rights monitors have criticised “*the slow progress in increasing access to secular education*” in Ireland. In a recent report, the UN committee overseeing the implementation of the covenant on civil and political rights said it was concerned about the slow progress, not only in divesting patronage but also in creating non-denominational schools and in phasing out integrated religious curriculums in State schools.

It is the position of the Workers' Party that our education system must be developed on an egalitarian, democratic and secular basis where the voice of all members of the school / college community, including that of the learner, is listened to and respected.

As a society we must take on board the fact that our education system is not fit for purpose in so far as it fails to take cognisance of the increasingly multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-religious belief changes that are taking place in society.

Our education system should be a public system, paid for through taxation and taken out of the control of churches and religious bodies.

3(b) How should progress on Diversity and Choice for Parents be measured?

Only a universal, public, secular education system can deliver truly integrated education and prevent segregation along economic and religious grounds.

3(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

As a priority religion must cease to be taught during the school day. Our schools must respect the diverse views of the student body on religious matters, including the views of children who hold

different religious views than the dominant school faith, and children who have no religious belief.

Religious prayer and ceremonies as well as faith formation and preparation for the sacraments should take place at the end of the school day / outside of normal school hours.

The Workers' Party takes serious issue with the stated preference of Minister Bruton for Community National Schools whose approach segregates pupils for Catholic faith formation classes during the school day because he believes the Catholic Church would be more likely to divest under the CNS model. Rather than divesting control this would, in fact, further embed the Catholic Church within the school system.

4. Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools

4(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

The proposal to give school management the decision making power to allocate resources as it deems appropriate, including 'to posts of Responsibility' is a first attempt to move teacher salaries away from the DES. If promotion posts are being paid for through the school this new scheme will not be included in life time earnings either in final salary or lifetime earnings from the point of view of pensions. This is a further concrete and underhanded attempt to attack the pension rights of public servants. In addition, it is the opening salvo in the attempt to move away from the agreed salary scale and payment of all teachers and support staff by the DES and follows closely in the footsteps of the disastrous experiments in the United Kingdom.

4(b) How should progress on Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools be measured?

The model of block grants, already in existence for certain devolved education services eg School Completion Programmes, is profoundly anti-worker and has reduced, what should be secure employment to precarious work. A further attack on those education workers is that they have no pension entitlements.

This proposed disengagement by the DES from its position as employer will not enhance local democracy. However, it will create uncertainty, duplication and governance issues all of which will impact negatively on the education service to be provided and on employment rights.

4(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

The proposed Excellence Fund has the potential to promote negative rivalry amongst schools. Education should be a creative and cooperative experience amongst teachers and school communities and not something of a latter day Dragons' Den competition.

The notion of the "*pool of experts*" has been tried in the UK where various so called experts have been allowed into the classroom with disastrous consequences for standards. The British Labour Party which initiated this policy has now completely reversed its position.

5. Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students

5(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

The approach adopted in the Programme is by and large general and aspirational. However we are concerned with the possible implications of the sentence: “*Focus must remain on literacy and maths, but new subjects should be introduced such as the arts, entrepreneurial education, and mental health awareness*” and in particular the inclusion of the phrase “*entrepreneurial education*”. In the context of the overarching philosophy of this government this phrase has very clear implications of the school curriculum being used for the ideological formation of students. It is surely not appropriate for students to be directed to a private profit model of economic development while the areas of societal responsibility, cooperation, global citizenship and related areas are being totally neglected.

5(b) How should progress on Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students be measured?

It is the view of the Workers’ Party that the concept of Promoting Creativity and the concept of Entrepreneurial Capacity do not sit naturally together and should be completely separated. The development of creativity, which may be manifested through music, the arts, a community project or other initiative, cannot be judged by the traditional end of year examination. It can only be judged over the course of a year / number of years but we would not prescribe an exact format for such assessment.

5(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

The priority action is to provide school communities with the resources, physical, financial and human, which will allow creativity to be nurtured and to flourish.

6. Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities

6(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

We support the use of school premises outside of school hours for genuine education and community use. We totally oppose the use of school premises by companies or individuals whose motivation is the creation of private profit even if the activities are in the education field eg grind schools or privatised childcare.

It is vital that after school use of school premises does not interfere with the day to day running of the school. It has to be recognised that classrooms are not vacated at the final school bell. Classrooms have to be prepared for the following day, work stations have to be organised, children's work assessed and displayed. There's the matter of children's books, equipment and other materials which are not brought home on a daily basis. There is also the matter of children's right to privacy. While unused classrooms may be ideal spaces for running homework clubs and after school activities classrooms which are in daily use are not at all suitable for such purpose.

6(b) How should progress on Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities be measured?

Making better use of Educational Assets cannot interfere with the day to day running of the school or children's right to privacy.

It must not disrupt after school classroom planning by teachers.

6(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

Homework clubs, after school clubs, community childcare where schools have the capacity to provide such facilities without interfering with classroom life and children's privacy. Where capacity does not exist then the DES should provide accordingly.

7. Special Needs Education

7(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

The Workers' Party welcomes the proposal to examine the adequacy of current special education access and funding in particular for children with Downs syndrome. We also welcome the possibility of an extension of the July provision programme. The proposal to create an in-school model of speech and language support is most welcome as is the proposal to increase the number of speech and language therapists and to invest in the NEPS service.

However, the Partnership for Government programme fails to acknowledge the fact that SEN supports have been seriously undermined in recent years. This has had a significant impact on both primary and secondary schools in less well off communities and especially in schools most welcoming of children with special learning needs including EAL children and those from the travelling community and children within a broad range of general learning disability.

7(b) How should progress on Special Needs Education be measured?

We can deem progress to have taken place when school communities are able to reach out to all their students and to provide an education that is inclusive and enabling of all its students to reach their true academic potential

7(c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

The criteria for entitlement to SNA support must be widened from just care needs to include academic needs.

It is grossly unfair that the cut off point for learning support under the GAM is much lower in schools in less well off communities than in more middle class schools because of the demand for the service in the former schools.

The level of SEN support including GAM should be based on the level of need of students in individual schools. However, SEN support must not be resourced through a block grant. It must remain the DES responsibility to monitor and administer the funding of all SEN staff.

8. Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future

8(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

There are a number of welcome proposals in this section of the programme, specifically the commitment to 2 double the number of apprenticeships by 2020". However there are a number of very negative elements also included. Specifically we refer to: "We support the creation of Technological Universities, linked to industry and with the capacity to create and retain jobs in regions.", and also to: "• Create financial incentives for the third level system to respond to skills gaps • Invite industry to partner in the delivery elements of the curricula at third and fourth levels". These commitments are clear steps along the road to the further privatisation of large sections of third level education as well as reducing those sectors to mere training regimes for private industry. This we oppose as it is both profoundly economically short-termist and educationally unsound.

8(b) How should progress on Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future be measured?

8.c) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

We live in an era of rapid technological and economic change. It is not possible now to predict the specific skill sets twenty, fifteen or indeed ten years hence. However what experience from the present and immediate past eras tell us is that the people who can best adapt to changing economic needs and develop new skills are those people who have received a broad education and have acquired learning skills which they carry with them throughout their lives.