Education, 2015

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Small primary schools review

A value-for-money review of small primary schools, undertaken within the Department of Education and Skills, commenced in 2010. The report of the review committee was completed in 2013 but was not released until 2015 (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). The report noted that Ireland has a high proportion of primary schools relative to its population and has a high proportion of small primary schools. The smaller schools have generally lower pupil numbers per classroom teacher. A small primary school is defined as one with less than 50 pupils and this category included some 600 schools with either one or two teachers when the review commenced.

The report indicated that small schools were significantly more expensive to run on a per-pupil basis than larger schools. The estimated per-pupil operating cost of a one-teacher school, at €6,870, was more than twice that of a pupil in a sixteen-teacher school, at €3,214. The report considered that amalgamation of all one-teacher and two-teacher schools within 8km of another school would seem to be a practicable option, and it recommended the establishment of a minimum primary school size of four teachers, including a principal.

In a statement accompanying the publication of the report, the Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan, TD, announced that its recommendations would not be adopted. She indicated that a voluntary amalgamation proposal for the smallest schools with reducing enrolments would be developed, and announced improved teacher retention thresholds for small schools, aimed at providing rural communities with security about the future of their schools.

Literacy and numeracy in primary schools

A study of literacy and numeracy in primary schools, published by the Educational Research Centre, indicated the first statistically significant rise in standards in over thirty years (Shiel et al., 2014). The assessments were administered by class teachers under the supervision of inspectors of the Department of Education and Skills to representative samples of 8,000 pupils in second and sixth classes in 150 primary schools in May 2014. Such assessments have been carried out at five-year intervals since 1980.

The assessment indicated that overall performance in reading and mathematics was significantly higher in second and sixth class as compared with the previous assessment in 2009. It noted that gender differences were relatively small. However, the assessment found that, despite overall progress, there had been no real reduction in the gap between pupils in disadvantaged urban schools and pupils in other school types.

The recent national strategy for literacy and numeracy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011a) included a number of targets related to increasing the proportions of pupils performing at the highest proficiency levels in English reading and mathematics, and reducing the proportions performing at the lowest levels. The assessment indicated that all of these targets have been attained well in advance of the scheduled target date of 2020 and that there may now be value in reviewing the targets.

Welcoming the upward trend overall, Minister O'Sullivan acknowledged the work of teachers, parents and students in improving standards. Cautioning against complacency, she indicated that the results leave scope for improvements, especially in maths and in DEIS schools. She requested a review of the national strategy, to be brought forward from 2016 to 2015. Budget 2015 had provided an additional €6 million for the progression of the national strategy, bringing the annual budget to €13.8 million.

Segregation in schools

Information collected during the department's annual census for the school year 2013/14 indicated a clustering of children from immigrant backgrounds in schools. The results showed that 80 per cent of immigrant-origin children were educated in relatively few schools. In twenty schools more than two-thirds of pupils came from a non-Irish background, while in two Dublin schools nine in every ten pupils came

from an immigrant background. Almost three in ten schools (29 per cent) had no immigrant-origin children enrolled.

Some of this concentration is explained by factors such as the fact that migrant families are more likely to live in urban areas where work is more readily available and in areas with affordable rental accommodation. It is also highly probable that newly arrived immigrants are more likely to choose to live in areas where members of their community are already established. However, this clustering may well be exacerbated by the discriminatory, although legal, admission policies of some schools (see later section ‘Ethos of primary schools’).

The findings led principals, academics and the Immigrant Parents & Guardians Support Association to call for more action to improve integration in schools.

Third-level student accommodation

In the months leading up to the commencement of the academic year in 2015, availability and affordability of accommodation in third-level centres became important issues for students. In September a report by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) indicated that third-level institutions planned to invest €1.2 billion in developing bed spaces in the period up to 2024 (HEA, 2015a). It estimated that 57,104 students sought accommodation in 2014 and that this number was expected to rise to 68,679 by 2024. In the same period the number of student-designated bed spaces, provided either on campus or via private accommodation, is set to rise from 31,296 to 43,496, leaving unmet demand of at least 25,000 bed spaces each year due to the expected growth in the student population in that period.

In response to the report Minister O’Sullivan announced the establishment of an interdepartmental steering group to examine proposals to deal with the accommodation crisis, including a possible new tax relief for developers. She also announced a grant of €30,000 to the Union of Students in Ireland to enable it to develop its homes.usi.ie website, aimed at promoting a rent-a-room scheme.

University for the south-east?

In 2014 discussions on a merger between Waterford IT and IT Carlow, with a view to the establishment of a technological university for the south-east, broke down when Waterford IT withdrew from the

process. Michael Kelly, former chairman of the HEA, was subsequently appointed by Minister O'Sullivan to initiate a consultation process between the various stakeholders (Curry, 2015).

Kelly's report stated that, given the intensity of stakeholder expectation within the region, there was no alternative to a merger between the two institutions (Kelly, 2015). He recommended that a reinvigorated process to establish the university should be started at the earliest possible date. In this context the report set out a road map for getting the project back on track, and recommended the establishment of a project steering group involving management from the two institutions and external facilitators, as well as a regional stakeholders' forum. Subsequently, Waterford IT agreed to a new round of talks to be chaired by an external businessman.

Traveller loses case on school admission

In February the Supreme Court dismissed an appeal arising out of a refusal by the all-boys CBS High School, Clonmel, to enrol a teenage boy from the Traveller community in 2010. In proceedings brought on behalf of John Stokes by his mother, Mary Stokes, it was argued that the enrolment policy of the school gave preference to the children of past pupils and therefore indirectly discriminated against Traveller children.

The case had gone through a number of stages before reaching the Supreme Court. After losing an appeal to the department, Mary Stokes complained to the Equality Tribunal, which found that requiring a parent to have previously attended the school disproportionately affected Travellers. It ordered that John be offered a place at the school and that the school should review its admission policy to comply with equality legislation. However, the school won an appeal to the Circuit Court, which found that the parental rule was discriminatory against groups, including Travellers, whose fathers were unlikely to have attended the school previously, but that the rule was in keeping with the school's general admissions policy. That judgement was appealed to the High Court by Mary Stokes on a point of law relating to the interpretation of Section 28 of the Equal Status Act, 2000. The High Court disagreed that the parental rule was discriminatory or amounted to a particular disadvantage. It found the potential discrimination which John might suffer was no different from the disadvantage suffered by any other person, not from the Traveller community, who could not qualify for an automatic place.

The Supreme Court ruled that the evidence put before the Circuit Court and the Equality Tribunal was insufficient to enable it to make a proper assessment on whether the boy was particularly disadvantaged due to the fact that neither his father nor another sibling had attended the school. The school had denied that its admission policy was discriminatory and argued that when the boy applied in 2010, there were 174 applications for 140 available places. It also claimed it had a policy of inclusiveness with members of the Traveller community.

University rankings

The downward slide in the international standing of Trinity College Dublin continued for 2015/16, with some mixed fortunes for others. In the *Times Higher Education (THE)* rankings Trinity fell from 138th to 160th. However, University College Dublin (UCD) moved up more than 50 places to 176th, just 16 places behind Trinity. NUI Galway remained unchanged in the 251–300 bracket, while University College Cork slipped from the 276–300 bracket to the 351–400 bracket.

In 2009 TCD was ranked 43rd in the world in a joint survey by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and *THE*, with UCD at 89th. In the first *THE* ranking, in 2010/11, Trinity was ranked at 76 and UCD at 94.

THE is regarded as one of the most prestigious rankings. Its performance indicators include staff-to-student ratios, PhDs awarded and proportion of international students on campus, and it places special emphasis on teaching and research. The general decline in rankings of the top Irish universities is attributed by the university sector to cuts in public funding over a five-year period, as well as stronger competition from overseas.

Education and the capital plan

Education was one of the key areas in the six-year capital plan announced by government in September (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2015). These proposed measures, amounting to a cost of €3.8 billion, included:

- additional school places at both first and second level by 2018 to meet increased enrolment demand;

- a programme to replace existing prefab school buildings with permanent classrooms and facilities;
- funding for refurbishment projects, site acquisitions and emergency works;
- €210 million on upgrading school information and communications technology systems;
- €350 million on improving facilities at third-level campuses across the country, with €40 million dedicated to the major Dublin Institute of Technology development already underway at Grangegorman.

In November Minister O'Sullivan gave details of 310 major building projects, including new schools and the expansion of existing facilities. The aim is to provide for 19,000 additional first-level places and 43,000 additional second-level places in the period 2016–21.

The building plan is informed by enrolment projections by the department (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). High birth rates in recent years will result in numbers rising to a peak of over 574,000 in 2018 in primary schools. This figure was last reached in 1985. Figures for second level are also projected to increase until 2025, when they are expected to be in excess of 400,000 for the first time.

Budget 2016

The budget of the Department of Education and Skills for 2016 was increased by €144 million to reach a total of €8.5 billion. Most of this will be spent on the creation of an additional 2,620 teaching posts at primary and post-primary level.

A reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio at primary level from 28:1 to 27:1 will require about 300 extra posts. In addition, 810 posts are being created to meet increased demographic demand. At post-primary level, 550 extra posts will be provided to enhance guidance counselling and leadership. This is in response to the impact of the moratorium on the filling of middle-management posts, operating since 2009, and the abolition in Budget 2012 of ex-quota hours for guidance counselling. Approximately 250 of the additional posts will be used to enhance the role of deputy principals at post-primary level in schools with fewer than 500 students and to assist teaching principals at primary level. An extra 600 resource teachers are being provided to cater for special educational needs. These will be in addition to the 610 special needs assistant posts announced earlier in the year.

At third-level there was an allocation of an extra €3 million to aid disadvantaged students, with the details to be announced in the spring of 2016. Some €2 million has been allocated to institutes of technology in Dublin, Munster and the south-east that are in a position to move to the next stage in their quest for technological university status.

Junior cycle reform

Controversy surrounding the reform of the junior cycle continued in 2015. In May compromise proposals combining the existing written examination with the new classroom-based assessment were agreed between Minister O'Sullivan and leaders of the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) and the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI).

Under the new proposals, teachers would oversee their own students in two classroom-based projects for each subject, with their assessment recorded separately from exam grades. Teachers would also supervise a written assessment task completed in class which would focus on skills and competencies developed during the junior cycle. This would be marked by the State Examinations Commission, which would also continue to mark the final exams at the end of third year.

Both the ASTI and the TUI decided to ballot their members on the proposed reforms. The TUI, which represents a third of teachers at second level, recommended acceptance and, on a 60 per cent turnout, the members voted to accept by a 69:31 margin. The ASTI recommended neither acceptance nor rejection and, on a turnout of 38 per cent, their members rejected the new proposals by a 55:45 margin. The ASTI also voted in favour of an escalation of the dispute, including strike action.

The different outcomes of ballots by the two unions have led to an unsatisfactory situation in schools throughout the country. By year end it was acknowledged that the initial stage of the reform – classroom-based assessment for second-year students in English – would not commence in the spring of 2016 in the majority of schools which are staffed by members of the ASTI. Schools with a mixed membership of ASTI and TUI will not be in a position to participate in in-service training for the reforms, which are designed for all staff members in individual schools. About one in four of all second-level schools will not be able to deliver the training.

Student engagement in higher education

A total of 27,359 students in 30 third-level institutions, representing a response rate of 21.9 per cent, participated in a survey in February–March 2015 on their experience of higher education (Studentsurvey.ie, 2015). Respondents were representative of first-year undergraduate students, final-year undergraduate students and postgraduate students. The survey, distributed electronically, was designed to inform developments within institutions while also providing a national data set. Eleven questions, dealing with a range of experiences, were asked and the following were some of the more interesting findings:

- a total of 63 per cent of students felt they were gaining knowledge and skills that boosted their chances of getting a job, while 37 per cent reported they ‘sometimes’ or ‘never’ gained these skills;
- on student–staff interactions, a large majority (77 per cent) indicated that they ‘never’ or ‘sometimes’ discussed their grades or assignments with teaching staff during the academic year;
- overall, 79 per cent of students selected ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ in reply to the question on how they would evaluate their entire educational experience at their college.

The survey, first piloted in 2013, was developed in response to a key aim of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b), which recommended that every higher education institution should establish an anonymous student feedback system to inform institutional and course development as well as national policy. It is co-sponsored by the HEA, Institutes of Technology Ireland, the Irish Universities Association and the Union of Students in Ireland.

Teachers and the Lansdowne Road Agreement

The Lansdowne Road Agreement, negotiated between government and public service unions in May, marked the beginning of a process to reverse pay and pension reductions for public service staff, including teachers, introduced since 2008. On 16 September the agreement was ratified by the public service committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions based on results of ballots of members of affiliated unions, including the Irish National Teachers Organisation.

Most of the unions which opposed the agreement agreed to accept the decision of the majority of the public service committee.

However, neither the TUI nor the ASTI completed their ballots until October. In the event, both unions rejected the agreement – the ASTI by a margin of 74:26 on a turnout of 31.5 per cent, and the TUI by a margin of 92:8 on a turnout of 60 per cent. Both unions subsequently indicated that they would not be bound by the majority decision of the public service unions to support the Lansdowne Road Agreement. They argued that the agreement did not address key concerns such as significant pay cuts along with deteriorating conditions and the additional demands teachers had faced in recent years.

The ASTI's general secretary, Pat King, indicated that opposition to the agreement could cost individual teachers significant sums of money in lost increments and leave the union isolated and plunged into very serious industrial disputes. He contended that the government would be most unlikely to make concessions to the ASTI and that it could lead to the unravelling of the agreement or undermine the other trade unions that had supported it.

Free school meals

The report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (2015) highlighted irregularities in the administration and funding of the School Meals Scheme for primary schools. It listed a catalogue of failures on the part of the Department of Social Protection, which provides funding towards the provision of meals for disadvantaged school children through two schemes – the statutory Urban School Meals Scheme and the non-statutory School Meals (Local Projects) Scheme. Funding for the schemes amounted to €39 million in the school year 2015/16, with an estimated 220,000 children benefiting.

A 2008 internal audit of four schools, carried out by the Department of Social Protection, had discovered irregularities of €802,000 in two of them. Audits in subsequent years detected irregularities in another four schools. Of the six cases of irregular payments on record, five involved inflated pupil numbers or false returns, three involved expenditure on non-food items and two involved failure to disclose other income sources. Arrangements were put in place to recoup the overpayments over a period. As noted in the report, three of these six schools remain in the scheme.

The report concluded that there has never been an evaluation of the School Meals Scheme by the Department of Social Protection to determine the extent to which it is reaching disadvantaged children, or whether it is having a beneficial impact on those children.

Students and grants

A report by the HEA indicated that 46 per cent of new entrants across all higher education institutions were in receipt of a student grant (HEA, 2015b). These findings were based on an analysis of all students who had commenced an undergraduate course in 2013. However, the report indicated considerable geographic variation and differences by third-level sector.

It indicated that 67 per cent of students from Donegal were in receipt of a grant as compared with 35 per cent in Dublin. This is explained by higher participation rates in Donegal as well as by lower average incomes in the north-west. The report also indicated that institutes of technology had the highest proportion of students receiving grants (56 per cent) and that universities had the lowest (36 per cent); other colleges had a proportion of 41 per cent. Letterkenny IT had the highest proportion of new entrants in receipt of a grant (71 per cent) while the lowest proportion was found in Trinity College Dublin (24 per cent).

Grants are payable through Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) to full-time undergraduate higher education students based on an assessment of their own or their parents' income. Other factors taken into account in the assessment include the number of dependent children in a family and the number at third level. The grants may cover fees and maintenance, fees only or partial fees. Across all HEA-funded institutions 42 per cent of new entrants were in receipt of full fees and various rates of maintenance. This varied from 52 per cent in the institutes of technology to 32 per cent in the universities and to 36 per cent in other colleges.

Ethos of primary schools

Issues associated with the religious ethos of schools came under renewed scrutiny in 2015. In the context of over 90 per cent of the 3,100 primary schools being under Catholic patronage, the report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector had recommended that the divestment of some Catholic schools be

encouraged in selected areas where parental surveys indicated a preference for choice (Curry, 2013). No substantial progress has been made since the forum's report was published in 2012.

In January Professor John Coolahan, chairman of the forum, stated that the Catholic Church's refusal to take a proactive stance in prioritising the divestment of schools had undermined the process. Since 2006 the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, has consistently argued that plurality of education patronage is desirable in an increasingly pluralist society. In November he stated that the Catholic Church was too slow to free itself from control of schools. His views are not necessarily shared by all other members of the Catholic hierarchy. Minister O'Sullivan stated that divestment is a complex process requiring the agreement of a range of stakeholders. Fr Michael Drumm, chairman of the Catholic Schools Partnership, stated that the transfer of schools to other patrons has proved difficult for a number of reasons, including local hostility.

One of the growing difficulties in recent years is that the children of minority faiths and of none maintain that they are discriminated against in their efforts to gain admission to Catholic-run primary schools. While schools under the multid denominational patronage of Educate Together are being established in areas of growing population, the problem is exacerbated in established areas where schools under Catholic patronage predominate. This has given rise to a situation where baptised children are given priority in admission to Catholic schools where there are more applicants than places. These oversubscribed schools are estimated to account for about 20 per cent of all primary schools and are mainly confined to urban areas. A further issue is that existing equality legislation permits school management to have employment and admission policies which protect their ethos. In its observations on the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill, 2015, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission recommended that existing laws be changed in order to eliminate discrimination in school admissions against children of minority faiths or no faith.

In December Minister O'Sullivan indicated that the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill, 2015, which proposed the introduction of a more transparent and fair admissions policy, would not be enacted before the end of the government's term. She also indicated that in January 2016 she would repeal Rule 68 of the *Rules for National Schools*, which states that 'religious instruction is by far the most important part' of the school curriculum (Department of Education,

1965). The continuing relevance of this rule has been questioned in recent years (Curry, 2015). In response, the Bishops' Council for Education stated that the ethos of faith schools was given expression in religious education and their admission policies, and that it was not the role of the minister to determine or interfere with the ethos of such schools. The repeal of Rule 68 may be regarded in some education circles as important but largely symbolic.

The establishment in December of a new organisation, Education Equality, to campaign against religious discrimination in all state-funded schools is yet another reason why the demand for change is likely to intensify in the future.

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