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Title	Overview of primary education – school year 2008/09
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Publication date	2009;2009
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (2009) 'Overview of primary education – school year 2008/09', Education Matters Yearbook 2008-2009.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
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Download date	2026-11-06 21:20:05
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17773

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Overview of Primary Education – School Year 2008/09.

(by Áine Hyland – submitted for publication in *Education Matters Yearbook* 2008 – 09.

This time last year, the world of education looked forward with confidence to a new school year in which primary education would no longer be the Cinderella of Irish education. Years of lobbying by teachers and parents had resulted in a Programme for Government (2007 to 2012) which recognised the importance of primary education and made specific commitments to improved funding and resourcing. We looked forward to reduced class sizes – and awaited the delivery of the commitment that the staffing schedule would be reduced from 27:1 by one point per year from 2008/9, so that by 2010/11 there would be one teacher for every 24 children. We looked forward to an increase in the day-to-day funding of primary schools, and particularly the doubling of the capitation grant. We anticipated new investment in and support of school-age childcare, "whereby children would be given access to a range of after-school and holiday-time activities, with a major focus on sports and arts".

Expectations were high – but they were soon to be dashed. During the summer of 2008, the first rumblings of what was to become an economic earthquake were felt throughout Ireland. The Celtic Tiger had disappeared and the weak mewing of a pathetic kitten began to be heard. By October, when the earlier than usual 2009 budget was announced, the writing was on the wall for most of the promises of the Programme for Government. The situation was to disimprove even more six months later in April 2009 when the Supplementary Budget was announced. The overall Education Budget would be reduced by €81 million to €9.493 billion. This would result in further reductions in teaching posts; reduction of special classes in mainstream primary schools and further cuts in all sectors of Irish education.

The implications for primary education of the budget cuts were profound. The increase in the staffing schedule would mean larger classes, and unemployed teachers. Any hopes of reduced class size were immediately dashed. In line with other public service employees, primary teachers' salaries were subject to a new pension levy of 7% from 1st May 09. Middle management posts in schools would be frozen so that teachers who had anticipated an additional allowance for such post would have to wait indefinitely. There would be cutbacks in the numbers of English Language teachers and special needs assistants. Prospects for employment for final year students from Colleges of Education were bleak. In schools other than DEIS schools, additional funding for school books, uniforms and other supports for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds would be withdrawn and hopes for increases in capitation grants were dashed indefinitely. All in all, a depressing and demoralising situation for pupils, parents and teachers – with very little light at the end of the tunnel.

The amalgamation of agencies flagged in the October budget led to the announcement in April that the National Education and Welfare Board, the School Completion Programme, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme and Traveller Services would be integrated. It also resulted in the announcement in October 2008 that the Statutory Educational

Disadvantage Committee, set up in 2002 under the Education Act of 1998 would be disbanded – a rather puzzling decision, since the Committee had completed its term of office in summer 2005 and had not met since then – nor had it been replaced. How exactly a non-existent committee can be disbanded is somewhat of a mystery, but no doubt the DES knows how to do these things!

On the positive side, the school year saw the appointment of the first female General Secretary of the INTO in almost 150 years. Sheila Nunan's accession to the important and influential role of General Secretary was welcomed by all who knew her. Her track record of commitment to travellers and to children from disadvantaged backgrounds augurs well for the ongoing support of the INTO of these pupils in our primary schools.

2009 also saw the announcement of an important innovation in Early Years Education. The decision in the April Supplementary budget to provide public funding for a year's pre-school education for all children is a major milestone in the history of early years education. It would be churlish to quote those who are critical of the measure on the basis that they believe that the available funding will not be sufficient to ensure a quality provision or that a Level 5 qualification is not an adequate level of qualification for pre-school teachers. As the Irish sean-fhocal says "Bionn gach tosnú lag" and we hope and anticipate that within a short period, the teething issues of a new system of pre-school education will be ironed out. The existence of the Síolta Quality framework and of the new Aistear Early Years curriculum (prepared by the NCCA) will help to ensure that the pre-school experience of Irish children in the coming decades will measure up to good practice internationally..

September 2008 saw the opening of 12 new Educate Together schools – responding to the growing demand by parents for primary schools which welcome children of all religions and none on an equal basis. This brings the total number of Educate Together schools to 56 – catering for over 10,000 pupils at present – and geared to cater for twice that number when each one of the schools reaches its full complement of pupils. Some of these schools opened in purpose built buildings – fast tracked efficiently and impressively by the Building Unit of the DES. Such developments show what can be done when the political and administrative will is there – like President Obama, "Yes, we can" – when we want to!

Other positive developments during the year included the further roll out of resources and supports under the Department's DEIS scheme – specifically the employment of the full complement of the twenty DEIS co-ordinators. Anecdotal evidence from Inspector's reports and from a small sample study by the National Economic and Social Forum, suggests that many DEIS schools are making impressive progress in their quest to improve literacy standards among their pupils. It is a pity that more comprehensive data in this regard are not made publicly available. It is not unreasonable for the tax payer to seek an assurance that the significant investment on DEIS initiatives (estimated at €10 million per annum) is achieving the desired outcomes.

The openness and transparency that now surrounds the work of the Inspectorate is a welcome development. The publication on the Department's Website of the reports on Whole-school

Evaluation, provides convincing evidence of the high quality of education provided by most of our primary schools. It is reassuring to find that the Inspectorate does not shirk its responsibility to bring schools to task where standards are not being met – such as the case of the Muslim School in Cabra where the Inspectors' report of June 2009 highlighted a litany of sub-standard teaching and failure to abide by basic regulations.

The school year 2008-9 will also go down in history as being the year when the first Community National schools were set up – Scoil Ghráinne, Phibblestown, Dublin 15 and Scoil Choilm. These two pilot national schools under the patronage of Co. Dublin VEC were set up with a mandate from the Minister for Education to cater for children of "all faiths and none", while at the same time providing faith-formation classes within school hours. This very interesting "experiment" has similarities to "The Irish Education Experiment" - the original national school system as set out in the Stanley Letter of 1831 and described by Donald Akenson in his 1979 book of the same name. Unfortunately, the 1831 experiment did not work, and it is difficult to see how the Scoil Ghráinne experiment can work, given the requirements of Article 44.2.3 of the Irish Constitution not to impose any disabilities or discriminate against any individual on the ground of religious profession, belief or status. How is Scoil Ghráinne taking account of the wishes of parents in relation to faith formation classess? It would appear that some local and national faith leaders are being asked for their views – but there appears to be no system of seeking parents' views directly. Surprisingly, it would appear that these schools have not yet set up their Boards of Management – a requirement that every other primary school in the country must satisfy before it is recognised by the DES. So the opportunity that is available in every other primary school in the country for parents to be directly involved in the management of their children's primary school and to have their views represented at management, appears to be denied to the parents of Scoil Ghráinne.

A formal request by this author for sight of the Religious Education curriculum (or curricula?) in Scold Ghráinne was ignored by the VEC and the DES and no reply was received. Why is such a significant development being worked out behind closed doors? What about the role of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in relation to advising the Minister on curriculum issues? It is not unreasonable to expect that the development of this new model of patronage, management and RE curricular provision should be discussed openly and transparently, given the possibility that it may well replace the traditional model of privately owned and managed, and publicly funded primary schools that has been the bedrock of the Irish primary school system for over 175 years.

How then do we summarise the school year 2008/9? From the financial and resources perspective, most stakeholders in the system earnestly hope that the old saying "Ni bheidh a leithéid ann arís, le cúnamh Dé" will apply. In relation to issues of control and governance, is it too much to ask that the spirit of openness and transparency, which has been the norm in Ireland since the National Education Convention in 1993, will return again? In the recently published Ryan report, we have seen the awful consequences of secrecy and exclusion that typified the culture of the Department of Education from the foundation of the State until relatively recently. That culture of secrecy must never again be a feature of the Irish

education system. Ireland is a mature democracy and it must act as such. The days of the Fanarite system are gone, i.e the days when the tribal or religious leaders were assumed to speak on behalf of the people. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the people of Ireland are well able to speak for themselves and parents should be asked directly for their views as to how the State might facilitate them in providing for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.