

People Before Profit

Education Policy

1. *Education should be funded and managed exclusively by the State rather than handed over to various patron bodies.*
2. *Establish a maximum class sizes: Our longer term goal is a maximum number of students in any class, anywhere in the country, should be 18.*
3. *School transport, uniforms, meals, educational materials and play and PE facilities provided free in all schools.*
4. *Employ lab assistants to cater for Science and ICT classes*
5. *Restore supports for vulnerable pupils and all those with special educational needs*
6. *Introduce modules on philosophy, political economy, arts and media studies in second level to promote creativity and civic awareness.*
7. *Abolish university 'registration' fees; extend and improve maintenance and back-to-education grants.*

Background

Education is a fundamental human right. It should be provided free of charge to all citizens at all levels: pre-school, primary, post-primary, third level, and adult education.

Putting this principle into practice has major implications for the way in which education is organised in Ireland. Historically, education has largely been left to voluntary organisations such as the Catholic Church, which continues to own and run 90 per cent of primary schools. More recently, NGOs such as Educate Together and other charities have established themselves as patron bodies and are seeking to expand their networks of schools at both primary and post-primary level.

Since 2012, when former Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn established the 'Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector', the school patronage debate has focused on the dominance of the Catholic Church and the need to cater for students from a range of religious backgrounds — and none — by providing for greater parental choice.

However, fundamentally for the Government, this is not about religion. It is about creating a more diverse 'market' of educational 'providers' as part of a "new framework of competition for public services":

Government is committed to driving greater use of alternative service delivery models. New and existing services are being examined to identify the optimal method of delivery. This may include partnerships with private enterprise, voluntary organisations and community groups. Central to this strategy will be the creation of a new framework of competition for public services. (*Public Service Reform Plan 2014-2016, 2.2.1*)

On a recent visit to Ireland, Finnish educational expert Pasi Sahlberg criticised this market-based approach in the education sector: “By making parental choice the cornerstone of its education system, Ireland is following a ‘lazy’, market-based strategy which is likely to produce greater inequalities and poorer learning outcomes...” (*‘Lazy’ strategy set to result in poorer learning -- expert, Irish Times, 26/06/2015*)

Against this background, the People Before Profit Alliance advocates an alternative to the Government’s market-based model of educational provision.

State education

Education should be funded and managed exclusively by the State rather than handed over to various patron bodies. PBPA advocates the nationalisation of all primary, secondary and third level educational institutions in the State. The closest existing model of such provision is the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which claim to be “democratically controlled, multi-denominational... [and]... co-educational” (<http://www.etbi.ie/publications/history/>). However, new structures should be established if necessary.

Policy Recommendations

Minimum standards: Primary and Post-primary

Minimum standards should be set for educational provision at each level. At primary and post-primary level, the following should be the norm:

- Modern, spacious, fully-equipped schools with multiple science labs, computer labs and classrooms with wifi access and iPads/tablets. Teaching and learning should never have to take place in dilapidated buildings or prefabs.
- Schools should provide school meals and all necessary educational materials free of charge, including textbooks, iPads, laptops etc.
- The maximum number of students in any class, anywhere in the country, should eventually be 18.
- Each school should have counselling and guidance services for all students.
- Additional resources should be provided for disadvantaged and traveller students, including smaller classes and one-to-one tuition as necessary.
- Early intervention should be provided for students with Special Needs.
- The number of teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNA) should match the needs of the school, based on a maximum class size of 18 students and on each individual student’s need for an SNA.
- Teachers and SNAs should have a maximum class contact time of 18 hours per week.

Specific measures – Primary Education

Primary education has suffered years of underfunding. Even at the height of the boom, spending was the fourth lowest in the OECD. It is a matter of priority to increase funding at this

level to compare favourably with other OECD countries. People Before Profit will reverse all cuts introduced and implemented by both the Fianna Fáil/Green government of 2007-2011 and the subsequent Fine Gael/Labour government.

The austerity agenda in education removed supports from pupils with special needs, those with English as an additional language and those experiencing disadvantage in rural areas. We commit to the immediate reversal of the full range of cuts implemented in these years. We will increase spending on education in line with changing demographics and with the need to improve and expand services.

Of the newly qualified primary teachers emerging from college each year, up to 600 face the prospect of not finding employment in Ireland. Teachers are emigrating in significant numbers while thousands of children languish in overcrowded classrooms. This is a total waste of human resources. Ending the class size scandal in Ireland will also help alleviate the unemployment crisis amongst teachers.

In prioritising funding for education, PBP recognises the importance of providing every child in this country with equal access to education. To ensure real equality of access, we commit to removing the cost burden on parents and guardians. We believe that uniforms, books, lunches and school transport should be provided by the state.

To ensure equal participation and success within education we believe that education must be child-centred and fully resourced so that every child can succeed. This means that the number of classroom and support teachers must be increased along with the facilities and resources available to schools.

Policy Recommendations

Large class sizes to be abolished.

- Infant classes limited to a maximum of 20 children
- Maximum class size at senior level to be set at 24 pupils in single age classes; 20 pupils in two-age-group classes; 15 pupils in classes of three or more age groups
- Small schools to be protected and supported in line with the wishes of local communities and parents, particularly in rural areas

Teacher numbers and training

- A survey of teacher need, in light of demographics and smaller class sizes, to be undertaken in conjunction with the INTO and completed within three months.
- Undergraduate and postgraduate training courses to be expanded as necessary

Literacy and numeracy

Literacy and numeracy to be targeted by increasing resources to schools:

- Annual ring-fenced library grant to all schools
- Reading Recovery and Maths Recovery training to be offered to all schools, with full substitute cover for teachers while in training
- Expansion of the 'Breaking the Cycle' Scheme, piloted in the 1990s, to all DEIS Schools
- Early Start preschool service to be put on a permanent footing where it already exists, and immediately extended to all DEIS schools
- One year sabbatical scheme to be made available to teachers to engage in upskilling/professional development/education

School buildings

- School building works and expansion of facilities prioritised as part of public works schemes
- Play and PE facilities guaranteed for all schools
- Proper planning, ensuring provision of schools in areas experiencing population growth
- Urgent improvement of the state provided broadband service. All schools to be provided with fast, free and filtered broadband so that it can become an integral part of classroom learning.
- Annual funding for ICT infrastructure in schools to ensure maintenance and upgrade as necessary
- Ban on commercial promotions and advertising, sales pitches, voucher schemes and branded lesson materials

Special Educational Need

- Immediately reverse the 15% cut to resource teaching hours
- Remove the cap on Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and broaden the current, very narrow, criteria for SNA support
- Reinstate targeted traveller education resources
- Provision of Occupational Therapy and Speech and Language Therapy services for children in Special Schools and children with special needs in mainstream schools, according to their needs
- Real support for integration for children with special needs in mainstream schools, including more resource teachers and the continued provision of special class teachers
- Expand NEPS to ensure that all evaluation, consultation and interventions are provided as required for children in need of support. The current caseload of between 12 and 40 schools per psychologist is unacceptable as is the 5,000:1 ratio of students to psychologists
- Ensure the provision of all necessary teaching and therapeutic resources for children who require them

Other Issues

- Immediate reversal of cutbacks in the school transport scheme and the introduction of charges at primary level — guaranteed free school transport for all

- In recognition of the importance of a school to maintain the fabric of a local community, give priority to supporting the continued presence of schools in communities across the country where local people deem it necessary
- Investment in arts and media education to ensure greater expression of creativity, media literacy and critical thinking among young people

Funding

- Double the capitation grant with immediate effect. Primary schools currently receive 92 cents per pupil per day to cover running costs
- Initiate a review of primary school funding to determine the appropriate levels needed to ensure all necessary running costs, including maintenance of ICT, are adequately met
- Remove all costs for parents/guardians associated with attending primary school by providing free school transport, free school uniforms, free lunches and free school books as is the norm in many countries
- Introduction of a strict code of conduct to govern commercial relations with schools prohibiting any advertising or marketing practices and establishing schools as “commercial-free” zones
- Ending the insufficient resourcing of schools, which forces school to avail of such commercial schemes — such as Tesco tokens — which in the end reap little real additional resources for the school but increase revenue for the company involved

School Enrolment and Admissions

- Ensure all children have access to their local state-funded primary schools, irrespective of their religious beliefs
- Remove Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act which allows discrimination against employees in religious-run workplaces
- Remove Rule 68 of Rules for National Schools which requires that a religious spirit must inform and vivify the whole work of the primary school.
- Specific religious instruction to take place as an extra-curricular activity, organised by parents and leaders of their religious community as required

Teacher/SNA salaries and supports

- Provide fully-funded professional development opportunities for teachers and SNAs within their existing working hours, with full substitute cover provided to schools
- Reverse the increase in formal working hours imposed on teachers and SNAs through the imposition of "Croke Park hours"
- Ensure that SNAs have access to redeployment panels that operate on a similar basis to those of primary teachers

Specific measures - Post-primary

- Substantial increase in the number of teachers employed in accordance with maximum class sizes and growth in pupil numbers due to demographic factors
- Teachers’ class-contact hours to be reduced from 22 to 18 hours per week without loss

of income

- Make all part-time teachers permanent with the full 18 hours
- Fully funded professional development for teachers to meet the challenge of curricular changes and developments in the use of ICT
- Employ lab assistants to cater for Science and ICT classes
- Introduction of modules on philosophy, political economy and media studies to promote political engagement
- Provide a wider range of subjects and allow students greater choice
- Integrate appropriate use of ICT into all learning activities
- Resist curriculum changes, such as the new Junior Cycle, that seek to undermine the public education system and stop the move to a marketised model
- A full-time NEPS psychologist for every 200 students
- NEPS psychologist to provide counselling to students in distress
- Qualifying criteria for Special Needs support to be widened significantly
- Provision of a full-time SNA for any student who needs one
- Replacement of all prefabs with modern school buildings
- Full refurbishment of all existing buildings to the highest standards, with particular emphasis on Science and ICT facilities
- Reverse all education cutbacks especially those that have targeted the most needy, such as Traveller, international, and Special Needs students
- Reverse all of the cutbacks made to date in teachers' pay and conditions
- Oppose public 'fitness to practise' hearings by the Teaching Council
- Lifting of the moratorium on Posts of Responsibility (first introduced in 2009)

Teachers

Teachers have faced a serious and sustained attack on their pay and conditions of employment since the economic crisis began in 2008. Workers should not have to pay the price for the recklessness of bankers, developers and their political allies. Nor should we allow the crisis to be used to undermine workers' rights that have been established in past struggles. People Before Profit advocates the immediate reversal of the attacks on pay and workers entitlements as a priority. This means

- Restoring the retirement age to 65 and reinstating early retirement schemes
- Reversing cuts announced in the 2013 budget to the maternity leave scheme
- Restoring full substitute cover for all sick leave
- Reversing all cuts to uncertified and certified leave
- Lifting of the moratorium on posts of responsibility
- Provision of substitute cover to all teachers attending training

Third level and further education

Irish higher education has seen huge changes since the crisis of 2008. The Irish Government is using the crisis to radically alter how education is delivered to students and how lecturers and staff in colleges do their work. The result is a one-model-fits-all Business University, no matter what the subject, no matter who the student. This corporate agenda is a cover for the increased privatisation of education.

Reductions in government funding have led to increased student registration costs and more direct involvement by multinational corporations for their own interests. University administrations have adopted corporate management methods and academics have seen authority ceded to external 'stakeholders', i.e. multinational corporations.

The structure and content of degrees is changing from broader general academic studies to modular programmes which deliver specific skill learning and outcomes, devised to enhance 'human capital' for employers. Students are finding themselves in overcrowded lectures and classes as funding is cut. Recession and unemployment means students and their families are shouldering more and more debt. Graduates are finding themselves without jobs and forced to emigrate.

University and Institutes of Technology staff are having to deliver 'more for less', within a two-tier employment system in which newcomers are on low pay, work longer hours, and have no tenure or security.

The neoliberal attacks on Irish higher education are the same as those being implemented across the world. In Chile and Quebec, student movements against these neoliberal 'reforms' have given expression to wider anger against austerity across society and they have forced their governments to back down. These are the models of resistance that People Before Profit supports and advocates. We seek to link up the fight to defend publicly funded education with the wider fight against austerity.

No to the reintroduction of fees: With increased registration fees and the cutting of maintenance grants students and their families are already shouldering huge levels of debt. People Before Profit is completely opposed to the re-introduction of fees in any form.

Abolish the registration fees: Registration fees in Irish universities are €2,750 and are set to rise to €3,000 in 2015-2016. Fees for college are the second highest in Europe, despite the pretence that there is a system of 'free fees'. In France, fees are €181 a year for a BA, €250 for a Masters and €380 for each year of a PhD. The registration fees represent the introduction of fees through the back door. Abolish the high fees for postgraduate courses to allow people to access training and develop skills.

Reverse the cuts to the Maintenance Grant: Maintenance grants have been cut by 4%, effective immediately. It is also now more difficult to qualify for the non-adjacent rate with the distance almost doubling. From 2011/12 students must now travel 45km instead of 24km to receive the higher rate.

Universities should be publicly funded. Over the period 2004/05 to 2009/10, full-time student numbers increased by 20% while public funding per full-time student fell by 16%. Numbers of staff in colleges have been cut by 6%, year on year. Public funding for third level education is reaching crisis point.

The cuts are now directly affecting the provision of front-line services for students such as library and student health services. We need a redirection of public funds, away from paying

off banking debt, to proper provision of education at third level. State funding to Irish higher education should be restored to pre-crisis levels.

Extend the back to education scheme: We need more investment in third level education to allow people who have lost their jobs to retrain. People must be given the opportunity to return to education to develop their skills and to learn new skills. Budget cutbacks mean that mature students can no longer automatically qualify for the non-adjacent rate of the grant, and will have to also meet new criteria.

Higher education should be based on peoples' needs and aspirations

Education is not a commodity with a price tag but a potentially enriching experience for the individual and society as a whole. Current official education policy assumes that all graduates want to become self-employed entrepreneurs or work for large multinationals. While some may, many more will want to use their knowledge to support and develop many other vital social activities – such as work in teaching, healthcare provision, arts and culture, social and community work, the environment, multiculturalism and international relations; much of which is provided by the public sector. The higher education institutions that we have in Ireland at present – underfunded, understaffed, and run like a series of competing companies -- are creating a suffocating orthodoxy of market neoliberalism which few feel free to challenge. People before Profit is committed to developing an education system developed for, by and in the interests of the people themselves, not for and on behalf of the interests of a tiny corporate elite