



**The General Synod Board of Education (Republic of Ireland)
of the
Church of Ireland**

**Submission to the Department of Education and Skills in relation to the
School Books Scheme (Primary)**

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Introductory Remarks

The General Synod Board of Education (Republic of Ireland) of the Church of Ireland welcomes this opportunity to provide comments and feedback on the operations of the School Book Scheme, launched by Minister Norma Foley, in March of this year.

In compiling its submission, the Board engaged in consultations with a number of principals and Boards of Management in Church of Ireland primary schools. The observations and feedback set out below reflects that direct consultation.

General views on the scheme arising out of consultations:

- In general terms, schools consulted welcomed the introduction of the school book scheme grant as a positive development for parents, particularly those needing financial support. The Board welcomes this as a further enhancement of providing for free primary level education.
- Schools also welcomed that the scheme provided schools with autonomy in choosing books and resources. This was particularly welcomed by the larger schools consulted, who highlighted that it prevented duplication in purchasing materials for use. The Board noted that this provision accords with the Departments policy (articulated a number of years ago) of enabling school level autonomy in the delivery of teaching and learning.
- Schools greatly welcomed the flexibility provided in the scheme which had the option for schools to purchase paper or digital resources (and other necessary materials) where funding allowed for such purchases. Schools welcomed this as a recognition of the professional expertise held at school level by the Department and, in particular, the Minister; and all expressed their appreciation of this aspect of the scheme.

Suggestions on improvements to the Scheme:

In considering what aspects of the scheme that could be improved, schools expressed the following views and suggestions arising out of their practical experiences in operating the scheme:

- many of our smaller schools found it challenging to access additional funding where the numbers of pupils had increased in the current school year. A significant proportion of Church of Ireland Primary Schools are smaller schools which experience a high degree of fluctuation in their pupil numbers in 2022-23 due to the impact of refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. This caused a difficulty as the funding awarded was based on the previous year's enrolment. It is suggested that a mechanism should be considered whereby schools can alert the Department to 'real time' need where there is an unforeseen rise pupil numbers. It was suggested that there may be a role for the REALT teams in this regard.

- The funding did not necessarily cover all books and stationery items for each school. However, a number of schools reported that the expectation of parents in their schools was that the scheme would not just subsidise but cover the costs of all school books and resource material. This seems to have arisen from the expectations created by the manner in which the scheme was announced in the media. It was suggested that the Department might moderate the language used in press releases to clarify that the scheme may not cover the entire costs of all school books and resources required by the school.
- Schools noticed that the retail cost of some school books increased after the scheme was announced. It is suggested that the Department of Education should engage with publishers and retailers with a view to securing agreement regarding pricing.

Challenges to operating the scheme:

- The additional administrative work involved was highlighted by all schools consulted as a very practical drawback to the implementation of the scheme. This resulted in the principal and secretary having to take on a significant piece of additional administration. The feedback from schools on this issue was that although provision was made in the scheme for the work involved administration to be undertaken by other staff members, in practice, this did not work as staff were not willing to take this on for the very little remuneration involved.
- The time involved for both administration staff and the principal was also highlighted as a significant factor in the administration of the scheme. Schools wish to highlight that detail of the work involved should be given closer consideration. Many schools highlighted that the administrative work involved to check, cover and label and then to distribute the books and stationery to pupils was a very significant job which in many cases took up a number of school days and kept teaching and the principal staff from attending to their core focus of teaching and learning and administration staff from other necessary duties. In this connection, smaller schools wished to highlight that there seemed to be an assumption, in the design of the scheme, that all schools have full time school administrative staff. This is not the case with the majority of small schools having only a part time school secretary. The extension of work hours or the employment of an additional person to carry out the administration of the scheme as a discreet project was not viable in most cases. Schools suggested that this aspect should be given close consideration for the future operation of the scheme.
- It was suggested that consideration might be given to providing some release days for a member of the ISM team or another teacher to work on the scheme. It was suggested that at least 5 days would be needed in schools of 8 classes or more to gather orders, seek quotes, budget, make the orders, sort out the payments and bills, update paperwork and records relating to the scheme, receiving the orders, checking the orders, dividing and distributing the orders, labelling the orders and covering books etc. The release days should be sub covered (though it is recognised that sourcing substitute cover is a particular challenge currently).

Discussions on funding:

- In discussing the funding of the scheme, schools agreed that any additional funding to parents is welcome, especially in the current economic climate where both parents and schools are struggling financially. A more significant increase to general capitation grant amounts would be more beneficial to parents as there would be less reliance on voluntary contributions and fundraising. Capitation amounts have only this year been restored to pre recessionary times. It was highlighted that even 10 years ago, capitation was not enough to cover the running costs of schools and that is not taking into account the inflation and increase to many essential services that have occurred in the meantime.
- The schoolbook scheme is seen as a positive move but schools suggested that rather than having a specific scheme, that a general increase in back to school allowance would have helped parents more generally. This would also have had the more general benefit of being funded through the Department of Social Protection rather than education budget.
- In terms of priorities for spending on education, a number of schools stated that they would not have placed schoolbooks at the top of the list and suggested that direct engagement on spending priorities with schools should shape and drive the spending priorities of the Department of Education.
- A particular source of discontent regarding funding related to the non-payment of the ICT Grant. Schools registered their annoyance and frustration with the decision not pay this grant and the inadequate communications around the reasons for its withdrawal. Some school leaders voiced the opinion that the withdrawal of the IT Grant coincided too readily with the announcement of the School Book Scheme for the two items not to be connected.

Conclusions:

- All schools recognised that the cost involved in purchasing school text books and other resource materials is an acute cost on parents and is at variance with the idea of seeking to deliver a primary education system which is no cost or low cost at the point of delivery to the pupil and parent.
- In this regard, schools suggested that rather than providing funding for individual schemes, which can be burdensome to deliver and which are open to the vagaries of market forces, that a more holistic approach is to provide an uplift in SEN resources, increased capitation funding, increased back to school and the 'children's allowance' and, more generally, a commitment to continue the reduction of the pupil teacher ratio. In this regard, schools commended the Department and the Minister for Education on the progress which has been made on such issues over the last number of Budgets and commends her for fighting for education funding among the heavy economic demands that are placed on Government.

Submitted on behalf of Church of Ireland Primary Schools by the General Synod Board of Education (Republic of Ireland).