

Improving Quality and Access to Education



Everybody, regardless of background or means, should get the best education possible. It is the single greatest driver of opportunity, quality of life, social equality and economic growth. As a small country in an increasingly globalised and competitive world, Ireland's education system can be our greatest competitive advantage.

Ireland should be a republic in which every child has the opportunity to achieve their potential – that means investing in early years professionals, teachers, principals, lecturers and professors, and making a real commitment to life-long learning. It means engaging better with parents; and it means tackling the often hidden problem of illiteracy in Ireland.

The Social Democrats believe Higher and Further Education is predominantly a public good, and our ambition is to provide universal equality of opportunity to a world-class, globally competitive third-level system. It's clear that significant investment in Higher and Further Education is required to address the chronic underfunding of recent years, significant demographic demand, and to maintain, protect and enhance quality.

Listed here are what the Social Democrats believe should be the policy priorities in education for the next ten years.

- Steadily reducing primary school class sizes to the EU average of 20;
- Making primary education free by funding school books, school transport, classroom resources and ending "voluntary contributions";
- Restoring capitation grants for schools to 2010 levels;
- Repealing Section 7 (3) c of the Equal Status Act to ensure that children can't be refused a school place on the basis of their parents' belief system - Current Government proposals do not go far enough.
- Ensuring resources are targeted to greatest need, including both areas of high economic disadvantage (as pursued by the DEIS programme) and the needs of disadvantaged students outside these areas;
- Investing in Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and providing continuous professional development for SNAs;
- Addressing pay inequality and teacher shortages
- Ensuring SEN students have access to education based on their needs;
- Connecting every school with fibre broadband and funding ICT hardware and software for education;
- Introducing curriculum to proactively develop children's mental health and wellbeing in the classroom;
- Enhancing continuous professional development for teachers and principals ;
- Supporting the key role of career guidance councillors;
- Introducing skills-based courses to include innovation, entrepreneurship, communications and critical thinking, together with required professional development for teachers.
- Improving resource teacher hours.
- Introducing a new innovative National Apprenticeships programme in line with the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships to help meet workforce needs and skill shortages. We want to see a particular focus on new apprenticeships in areas such as coding, IT security and AI, and to ensure there is adequate skills supply in areas such as care, youth work, childcare, financial services, creative and digital media, and other areas;
- Reducing Third Level fees and progressively increasing funding to achieve EU average funding levels;
- Investment in adult education, IT literacy and financial literacy;
- Investing in access programmes and reforming maintenance grant schemes to ensure broad sociodemographic representation across the third level system.