

**Social  
Democrats**

# Education

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Investing in our Children, and in our Future Prosperity

For the Future  
It Starts Here

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## Key Points

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Make primary and secondary education truly free** by fully funding all school textbooks, the school transport scheme, and removing the need for voluntary contributions.
- **Establish a Citizens' Assembly** on the future of the education system.
- Aim for a situation where, by the end of one term of government, all schools have at least **one specialist emotional counsellor/therapist** on staff.
- **Establish a DEIS+ scheme.**
- Fully restore **posts of responsibility** in primary and secondary schools.
- Phase out the use of **pre-fabs in schools.**
- Fund **hot school meals** in every school.
- Continue to professionalise our **Special Needs Assistants.**
- Reduce third level fees by **phasing out the student contribution charge.**
- Increase funding to the **SUSI grant scheme.**
- Reduce teacher allocation ratio at primary level to **20:1** and at secondary level to **18:1.**
- Invest to achieve the international benchmark of **15:1 staff student ratio** in higher education.
- **Increase third level core funding** through State contributions.
- Develop an **Arts & Social Inclusion in Education Strategy.**
- Aim to **remove 'faith formation' from the school day.**
- **Fully enact and resource** the EPSEN Act.
- Invest in **more significant speech and language support.**
- **Increase funding for apprenticeships** through the National Training Fund.
- **Increase the R&D budget to 2.5% of national income** and increase investment in 'basic' research to balance applied research.
- Improve Ireland's rate of **lifelong learning participation.**

## Introduction

Education is the single greatest driver of opportunity, quality of life, social equality and economic growth. The Social Democrats believe education is not just the accumulation of knowledge to facilitate future employment; we understand it to be the holistic development of each child to reach their potential and engage positively in society.

There can be no equality of opportunity in education without also understanding and addressing the disadvantages some children experience at home. We need a whole-of-society approach to investing in our children's future.

The education of our children is **the bedrock of our country's future; economically, socially and culturally**. All the research suggests that well-targeted investment in education is paid back many times over, with children and young people with high quality educational experiences having better life outcomes and employment prospects.

Ireland has a strong track record on education, with one of the highest school and third level completion rates in Europe. We have thousands of dedicated teachers and support staff delivering high quality education across the country.

However, we are **failing to invest adequately in our infrastructure and people**, with a low educational spend compared with European neighbours. Despite the fact education is a fundamental human right for all children as enshrined in the Irish constitution and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children with disabilities are being failed. And though there have been some positive recent developments, like free textbooks and an extension of hot school meals, **the cost of education remains too high**, and too many children are still being left behind.

Ireland should be a republic in which every child has the opportunity to achieve their potential. That can only happen with a **well-resourced, modern and inclusive education system**. Our five priorities in education will be to:

- Significantly **reduce the cost of education**.
- **Invest** in our educators and infrastructure.
- Target **disadvantage** and invest in **wellbeing**.
- Ensure **equality and inclusivity** in our education system.
- **Innovate** for the future.

## Cutting the Cost of Education

### *Making Primary and Secondary Education Truly Free*

Despite the introduction of free textbooks for some students, half of primary and two-thirds of secondary school parents said they were worried about meeting back-to-school costs in September 2023, according to Barnardos.

Many families struggle to meet the costs associated with school uniforms, transport and 'voluntary' contributions. The Social Democrats will **end state subsidies of private schools and invest in public schools**, including a significant increase in hot school meals and breakfast clubs.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Make primary and secondary education truly free** by fully funding all school textbooks and classroom resources, abolishing payments for the school transport scheme, and providing capitation grants at such a level as to remove the need for voluntary contributions.
- Fund **hot school meals** in every school over the lifetime of the next government.
- Invest in the establishment of more school **Breakfast Clubs**.

### *Reducing Costs and Improving Services for Third Level Students*

Third level students are severely affected by rising costs and an acute shortage of affordable accommodation. Despite Ireland having a high rate of students attending third level, accessibility issues remain. Amongst other things, the student contribution charge should be eliminated to **reduce the financial barriers to accessing further education**.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Reduce third level fees** by phasing out the student contribution charge.
- Increase **funding to the SUSI grant scheme**.
- Increase **PhD stipends** to €28,000 per year.
- Invest in **more affordable student accommodation**.
- Increase funding for **mental health at third level institutions**.

## Investing in Our Educators and Infrastructure

### *Investing in Our Educators*

The majority of teachers feel large classes have a negative impact on learning and on the disciplinary atmosphere in a classroom.

The Social Democrats are committed to **reducing the teacher to student ratio** at primary and secondary level, which is currently one of the highest in Europe.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Reduce the teacher allocation ratio at primary level to **20:1** and at secondary level to **18:1**.
- Restore **pay parity for teachers** and end the unjust two-tier system.
- Fully restore **posts of responsibility** in primary and secondary schools.
- **Recognise overseas teaching experience** for returning and migrant teachers entering the pay-scale.
- Recognise the contribution of our Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and **further professionalise the sector** by providing improved job security, further education opportunities, and a clearer career pathway, in consultation with their representatives.

This would include raising minimum qualifications to Level 6, and ending year-to-year contracts for SNAs as the standard model.

### *Increasing School Funding and Investing in Infrastructure*

Capitation payments are too low, forcing schools to seek voluntary contributions to meet basic running costs.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Increase capitation grants** and index the level of the grant to costs relevant to running schools, including energy.
- Increase **Management Body Grants** by 50 per cent, to allow these organisations to catch up to where they were more than a decade ago, in terms of the grant's true value.
- **Accelerate the school investment programme** and phase out the use of pre-fabs in schools.

### *Addressing Third Level Funding*

Our ambition is to provide universal equality of access to a world class, globally competitive third-level system.

It's clear that **significant investment in higher and further education is required** to address chronic underfunding, significant demographic demand, and to maintain, protect and enhance quality within the system.

While more students are now attending third level than ever before, investment in our universities has not kept up with increased enrolment.

The third level sector is now chronically underfunded, with a high staff to student ratio by international standards. **If we are serious about giving our young people the opportunity for further education, we must resource it.**

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Invest to achieve the international benchmark of **15:1 staff student ratio**.
- **Increase third level core funding** through State contributions.
- Ensure a **move away from insecure and precarious contracts** as the norm for staff in higher education.
- Focus on **improving the quality of higher education programmes**, including engagement with students and learning outcomes, and on the development of a **more responsive and flexible** higher education system.
- Take action to ensure **investment in higher education is used effectively**, including the additional regulation of course costs, and improvements to the performance management framework and funding allocation mechanisms.

## Targeting Disadvantage, Investing in Wellbeing

The Social Democrats recognise our schools, with their dedicated staff, as one of the most important and formative settings for children. Their importance is perhaps **even greater for those children who have experienced trauma, disadvantage or social exclusion.**

The pandemic exposed our children to prolonged periods of remote learning, which has had lasting impact on the mental health of many and learning impacts on a generation of children. There are now 90,000 children living in consistent poverty in Ireland. One in three have experienced mental health challenges and demand for specialist services soared during the pandemic. Most schools are still not fully resourced to support students needing additional help. **Now more than ever, we need to invest in additional services within schools, including more teachers, SNAs and support staff to ensure no child is left behind.**

Successive Joint Oireachtas Education Committee reports have raised the same concern regarding absence of specialist counsellors/therapists in all primary and secondary schools. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) should be reconstituted and expanded urgently as the National Educational Psychological and Counselling Service (NEPCS) and mandated to provide **specialist Emotional Counselling and Therapeutic Supports, on site, in all primary and secondary schools.** The Service should be adequately resourced and funded to ensure it can deliver on its mandate.

Trauma and adverse childhood experiences impacting on the mental health of our children and young people were exacerbated during the pandemic, including the additional emotional and financial strain of lockdown on so many families.

School-based emotional counselling is well established in 62 countries, and is mandatory in 39 countries, with a further seven countries in the process of developing such services. **Mental health is an education issue:** it impacts directly on children and young people's engagement, attendance, motivation, concentration, peer and teacher relations, and ultimately academic attainment in school.

The School Completion Programme (SCP) is fundamental to supporting students and tackling educational disadvantage. To ensure the programmes administered by the SCP – such as after school programmes and career guidance – can function, we must ensure appropriate funding for these vital services.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Aim for a situation where, by the end of one term of government, **all schools (primary and secondary) have access to at least one specialist emotional counsellor/therapist** as a permanent member of the staff.

This will begin with a local area team, first, before evolving to one per school.

- **Establish a DEIS+ scheme** to provide multi-disciplinary teams to address intergenerational poverty, including counsellors/ play therapists for the most disadvantaged areas.
- Continue to fund the School Completion Programmes (SCP), and develop a **new employment framework** for SCPs to ensure the staff who are so vital to the programmes are retained.
- Reconstitute NEPS and expand it as the **National Educational Psychological and Counselling Service (NEPCS)** and mandate it to provide specialist Emotional Counselling and Therapeutic Supports, on site, in all primary and secondary schools.

This will help schools dealing with complex needs that teachers are not qualified to deal with.

- **Increase the school meals programme budget** by 20 per cent to improve food quality.
- Extend the **Home School Liaison Scheme** to more schools.
- Step up investment in **guidance counselling** to support student emotional wellbeing and future career development.
- Develop an **Arts & Social Inclusion in Education Strategy** to promote a whole school approach to the arts and creativity, and develop community arts spaces for young people especially in areas of higher poverty.
- Invest in books to encourage children to read for enjoyment, by establishing an annual **School Library Grant** and having a long-term aim to establish a school library (with a librarian) in every school.
- Ensure every child has access to nature by establishing **School Gardens** in urban schools.

## Ensuring Equality and Inclusivity in Education

### *Creating a Secular and Inclusive Education System*

A modern Irish democracy must respect and **reflect the diversity of Irish society** and the citizens which it serves.

Increasingly, a significant number of parents feel that they have no option but to send their child to a school which does not align with their belief system.

Although there have been some attempts to introduce pluralism to the Irish education system, approximately 90 per cent of State-funded schools remain under the control of religious bodies. It is long past the time where this was reflective of the country in which we live and the Social Democrats believe that **reform is urgently needed**.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Establish a Citizens' Assembly** to make recommendations on the future of the education system, including on:
  - Assessment, and access to third level, with emphasis on developing fairer and more accessible frameworks for third level admissions.
  - How the system might better reflect and serve modern Ireland, and meet the educational goals of inclusivity and diversity, as well as the issue of school patronage.
  - The rights of different groups of children, including children with disabilities, Travellers, and children from migrant backgrounds.
- Aim to **remove 'faith formation' from the school day**, with it to be provided as an afterschool option.
- Use the 150 minutes per week allocated to 'faith formation' in the Primary Curriculum for **a new ethical education programme as part of SPHE**, along with enhanced time for other subject areas including Physical Education.
- **Rigorously follow-through on school divestment** as per recommendations from the Forum on Pluralism and Patronage.
- Amend section 37 of the Employment Equality Act 1998 so that teachers **cannot face religious discrimination** in their employment.

### *Ensuring Educational Equality for Children with Learning Differences*

Too many students with disabilities are not having their right to education vindicated. Mainstream schools need to be resourced to support the inclusion of children with additional learning needs.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Review the **EPSEN Act to bring it in line with the UNCRPD** and then enact it.
- Develop a **road map and strategic plan on Special Education and Inclusive Education**, co- designed with children and families.

The strategy will ensure all school buildings are accessible and suitable to support all children, that educators and all school staff have training which is firmly focused on children's rights, and will develop a system wide model to enable access to therapies in schools.

- Invest in **more significant speech and language support**, shared between schools where necessary.
- Ensure that every disabled child / child with additional educational needs gets **access to a school place** in the same time frame as every other child in the country.
- Ensure that **all schools are resourced to meet the needs of all children** with adequate special education teachers, special needs assistants and any other resource children require to access their right to education.
- Frontload the **assignment of SNAs** to schools.
- Support the call for **increased time** in state examinations for students with **dyslexia**.
- Provide additional funding for accessible educational material for **deaf, blind, or vision-impaired students**.
- Compile **disaggregated data** on the education experience of disabled children and children with additional educational needs.
- **Fund Bookshare Ireland** to provide accessible educational course material for blind or vision-impaired students.
- Fund a staff member at every Education and Training Board with the role of **promoting disabled students' participation**.

### *Tackling Discrimination and Removing Barriers to Access*

Serious barriers exist for many young people accessing their right to education. The use of **reduced school timetables** violates a child's right to education and should be exceptional; schools should be fully resourced to provide additional supports as required.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Aim to eliminate **reduced school timetables and reduce suspensions** for children in primary and secondary school.
- Resource the implementation of the new ***National Action Plan on Bullying***, including providing specific prevention initiatives targeted at protecting minority groups.
- Fully resource the ***National Access Plan*** for third level, to support the greater participation of Traveller students, those with disabilities, and those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.
- **Reduce the financial barriers** to part-time study at third level, which affect single-parents and other cohorts who cannot study full-time.
- Review the **CAO points system** to develop a fairer framework for third level admissions.

## Relationships & Sexuality Education (RSE)

Children's Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) must be **informed by best practice in science and healthcare**. This means that the curriculum should be standardised across all publicly-funded schools.

It is not acceptable that children in primary schools can be taught, as is often being done, that relationships can be placed in a hierarchy, depending on sexual orientation. **It is also utterly unacceptable that LGBTQ+ teachers should be expected to teach that their relationships are somehow 'lesser'**.

In 2021, the Social Democrats brought forward a Bill seeking to reform the way RSE is taught, however it has been repeatedly delayed by Government. The Bill would amend the Education Act to, among other things, require schools to teach RSE solely in accordance with the prescribed curriculum which must be evidence-based.

**Education, based on facts and science, should be the bare minimum that all of our children can expect**, no matter what the ethos of their school. This is especially important in this country given the Catholic Church owns more than 90 per cent of the country's primary schools, a practical monopoly which is unlikely to change anytime soon.

## Innovating for the Future

### *Investing in Apprenticeship Schemes and Further Education*

Apprenticeships and Traineeships are an essential part of the Further Education and Training system in Ireland. **Apprenticeships should be better valued and promoted as a real alternative to university.**

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Increase funding for apprenticeships**, funded through the National Training Fund surplus.
- Use the surplus in the National Training Fund to:
  - Resource the **National Apprenticeship** Office to drive the delivery of the action plan, to bring strong alignment between training schemes and employment need.
  - Reinststate the **Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme (AIS)** to support SMEs and micro businesses to recruit new apprenticeships.
  - The AIS should be **targeted at apprenticeships with low levels of registration** such as block-laying, plastering, painting, and decorating.
  - Further incentivise apprenticeships by **removing the student fee** in college.
  - Provide **subsidised upskilling courses** in areas with acute skills shortages, like the digital economy and green energy.

It should be the norm for students to apply for apprenticeships and courses aligned to a specific trade through the CAO.

- Have an objective of the profile of the apprenticeship population more closely reflecting the profile of the general population.

This will include a focus on the **increased participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds**, as well as and older workers (the age profile of apprentices in Ireland is young compared to other countries and apprenticeships are predominantly taken up by those of an age when second level education is completed).

We will also aim for improved participation in apprenticeships **for women and for people with disabilities.**

### *Investing in Research and Development*

Following years of underfunding, Ireland is under-resourced relative to our ambitions in higher education and innovation.

Funding for Research & Development (R&D) in this country has not recovered since the financial crash. **There is a clear need for a larger role for the state** in ensuring that a sufficient amount of the R&D that is vital to maintaining an innovation ecosystem is conducted.

Higher Education institutions will be vital in delivering on this. **How we structure and fund our higher and further education system will have a huge impact on how we fare in tackling the many challenges we face.**

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Increase the R&D budget to 2.5% of national income** and increase investment in ‘basic’ research to balance applied research.
- Invest in a **Research & Innovation transformation fund** so that Technological Universities can meet research growth targets as set out in the TU Act.
- Introduce specific funding to support Technological Universities (TUs) as **regional drivers of innovation and to engage with SMEs, MNCs and start-ups** on innovation training and strategy development.
- Begin the process of creating a **full university in the southeast of the country** via the upgrading of the South East Technological University.
- Introduce targeted supports to enable SMEs to invest in innovation and productivity, including through the expansion of the **Enterprise Ireland Innovation Voucher Scheme** with a supportive mentoring programme. We would also increase the Innovation Voucher value to €10,000 to encourage higher levels of research, development, and innovation activity within business.
- **Increase investment in Teagasc** to support farmers in the changing world environment, particularly by promoting research related to climate change and future options for sustainable agriculture.

### *Investing in Lifelong Learning*

Lifelong learning helps support a vibrant and sustainable economy, including by keeping skills up to date. It also has an **important contribution to make to people’s wellbeing, creating a more inclusive society, and supporting a vibrant**

**and sustainable economy.** There are also significant social and health benefits to the non-vocational element of lifelong learning and community education.

With more people working for longer, and in the context of current unprecedented labour and skill shortages, there is a pressing need to ensure that the talents and skills of a multigenerational workforce are resourced and developed, particularly those of older workers.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Set a target to **increase Ireland's rate of lifelong learning participation** from around 13 per cent to a new target of 20 per cent.
- Create **appropriate sub-targets** for older workers and those with lower levels of qualifications, with the goal of **increased engagement** with these cohorts who have traditionally had lower levels of engagement with lifelong learning.
- Seek to address issues relating to costs and age discrimination in accessing training and further education, including through **increased grant funding for qualifying participants**.
- Support the implementation of the **Adult Literacy for Life** ten-year strategy.
- Support higher education institutions to complete the process of fully mainstreaming **Recognition of Prior Learning** to support skills objectives.

### *Investing in Community Education*

There is significant evidence that person-centric educational programmes such as those at the core of community education can have a transformative impact on the lives of adult learners. In particular, the Social Democrats recognise that community education offers an effective intervention that supports lone parents and their families across a number of policy areas including adult education, mental health, children, equality and integration.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Strengthen investment in community education, on a multi-annual basis.
- Make **multi-annual investment in community education** the norm, and reform financial supports aimed at – and develop more robust wraparound supports for – adult learners, including relating to childcare, technology and equipment, and travel.



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