

# Education & Childcare

Reaching our full potential

Sinn Féin Education & Childcare Platform 2007



# Education - Reaching our full potential

Sinn Féin believes that education is a basic and fundamental human right. Education should be free universally available as of right and assist everyone without exception to develop her or his full potential. Instead of guaranteeing everyone equal access to the highest standard of education, current Government policy has entrenched educational inequalities and a two-tier system. Educational expenditure is one of the lowest as a percentage of income.

More than one in four primary school pupils are being taught in overcrowded classrooms and many are taught in run-down facilities. Too many children still go to school hungry. Almost one quarter of children of working-class parents do not sit the Leaving Certificate. The numbers leaving school without qualifications have remained unchanged since the 1990s, and an estimated 1,000 students per year cannot even make the transition from primary to secondary education. Approximately one quarter of the adult population have literacy and numeracy problems. Meanwhile taxpayers pay €80 million per annum to subsidise the private education system, even though the children of the majority will never have a chance to attend these exclusive fee-paying schools.

Sinn Féin has a credible plan and the political will to make education available to all as of right, on the basis of full equality.

## THE SINN FÉIN RECORD IN LEINSTER HOUSE:

- Our Dáil Team introduced a motion regarding the provision of education for children with special needs, pressed the Minister for Education and Science to increase resources for the National Educational Psychological Services and to reduce waiting times for children to be assessed, demanded more speech and language therapists and for their placement under the remit of the Department of Education and Science, and urged the Minister to protect the rights and entitlements of children with autism and special needs and to open the Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism.
- We supported the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) campaign to reduce class sizes, and pressed for more funding for modernising and constructing school buildings and other educational facilities.

- We called for an increase in the maintenance grant for third level students to reflect the true cost of living.
- We urged the Minister to increase resources for adult literacy, proposed a progressive national strategy on lifelong and work-based learning focused at those most in need of training, re-training and upskilling, pushed for the abolition of part-time fees and advocated the introduction of paid educational leave.

## SINN FÉIN PRIORITIES IN GOVERNMENT:

### Increased Public Investment in Education

- Spend at least 6% of GDP on education, in keeping with best international practice.
- Increase funding per pupil at pre-school and primary level so that expenditure will be more equal to that at third level, ensuring that schools in areas of high disadvantage receive proportionately more funding and resources.
- Review the current system of ownership and management of schools with a view to ensuring equitable education for all, sufficient school places for all pupils wherever they live and the best management of schools.
- Set a target to eliminate the need for subsidy of educational provision by charitable organisations (in the form of schoolbooks and school breakfasts and lunches) within the lifetime of the next Dáil.
- Place a new emphasis in the school curriculum at primary and secondary on civic education, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and encouragement of voluntary activity across society. Education needs to prepare children for life and encourage creativity and human thought and not just be about providing the next generation of workers.

### Increased Investment in Early Years Education

- Immediately extend the Early Start pre-school project to all schools with pupils from disadvantaged areas, with a maximum child to adult ratio of 12:1.
- Introduce a universal pre-school session of 3.5 hours per day, five days a week for all children aged 3-5 years (see also next section on childcare).
- Increased Investment in Primary Level and Reduced Class Sizes
- Invest towards implementation of a pupil-teacher ratio of 15:1 in all primary schools. As a first step, immediately reduce all class sizes for children under 9 years of age to a maximum of 20 pupils.

- Legislate, plan and budget for immediate upgrading of substandard schools and building of premises where required. Ensure that the practice of educating children in prefab buildings can be eliminated within the lifetime of the next Dáil.
- Introduce a standard statewide school breakfast and lunch programme to supply nutritious food free of charge to schoolchildren.
- Provide adequate funding for the National Education Welfare Board to increase the number of Educational Welfare Officers to combat school absenteeism and low attendance.
- Provide greater support for children with additional needs.

## Increased Investment and Reform in Post-Primary Education

- Immediately establish a primary school database to track the transition of students from primary to secondary school and increase funding for schools with low Leaving Certificate completion rates.
- Invest to progressively reduce class sizes at post-primary level.
- Increase internet use for educational purposes and reduce the computer/student ratio to 1:5 by substantially increasing investment in ICT provision for schools to €130 per pupil.
- End the Junior and Leaving Certificate examination and points system in favour of more continual assessment.
- End the practice of School League Tables.

## Guaranteed Right to Free Education

- Extend the school book rental scheme nationwide.
- Introduce a new Back to School Allowance that absorbs the current Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance and introduces an additional payment for books and other expenses to more accurately reflect the true costs of sending a child to school. Extend eligibility for this scheme to all families in receipt of Family Income Supplement in addition to those in receipt of social welfare.
- Keep funding for schools fully public and under democratic control instead of relying on the private sector to protect schoolchildren from manipulative advertising and corporate agendas.

## Support for Multi-Denominational Schools and Facilitation of Cross-Border Access

- Allocate adequate funding for the Educate Together schools.
- Facilitate cross-border access to the school that is geographically closer.
- Eliminate cross-border fees affecting third level students from the 26 Counties who choose to study in the 6 Counties and vice versa.

## Support for Special Needs Education.

- Allocate more resources for the National Educational Psychological Service to reduce waiting time for assessment and subsequent early

detection of special educational needs.

- Fund appropriate supports within mainstream classrooms for children with special needs. This should include adequate provision of special needs assistants where required.
- Adopt an all-Ireland approach to securing rights and entitlements for those with autism through a rights-based legislative framework. Prioritise action on autism to ensure the earliest intervention for all who need it, access to Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) and enhanced funding for people with autism, their carers and support organisations.
- Deliver the All-Ireland Centre of Excellence for Autism at Middletown, Co. Armagh, which was initiated by Martin McGuinness when he was Education Minister.

## Educational Equality for Traveller Children

- Fully implement the Traveller Education Strategy and develop supplementary national education strategies for the inclusion of Traveller, Roma and other ethnic groups as necessary to systematically address segregation and combat discrimination, prejudice and racism in the educational setting.

## Positive Educational Integration of International Newcomer Children

- Incorporate teaching of different cultures, beliefs and languages into the mainstream curriculum to foster interculturalism.
- Improve training for ESL teachers and remove caps on the number of language support resource hours.
- Facilitate and assist children from immigrant backgrounds to learn and/or retain their native languages.

### Promotion of Irish Language Learning and Irish Medium Education

- Improve provision of naíscoileanna and Gaelscoileanna.
- Keep the Irish language as a core subject at post-primary level with increased emphasis on oral and aural Irish.
- Provide facilities in every third-level institution for students to pursue their studies through the medium of Irish.
- Establish an Irish language university.
- Increase Government support for accessible and affordable Irish language learning for adults.
- Provide adequate training and support for all teachers to have a basic qualification in Irish, reform an Scrúduit le hAghaidh Cáilíocht sa Ghaeilge, and introduce certification and mobility measures to ensure that teachers of Irish from the 6 Counties can work in the 26 Counties and vice versa.
- Facilitate schoolchildren, particularly those from disadvantaged areas, to attend the Gaeltacht for immersion learning.
- Teach a second subject through Irish at primary school level such as PE, music or drama.

## Increased Accessibility of Level/Further and Higher Education

- Set targets to increase the number of students in further and higher education, especially part-time and adult students and other groups (including people with disabilities and Travellers).
- Provide third level access programmes for schools with a low take-up of places.
- Provide adequate financial assistance and support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to complete their courses.
- Double the third level grant to reflect the true cost of living.
- Implement the McIver Report recommendations to ensure that Post Leaving Cert Colleges (PLCs) receive adequate resources and other supports necessary for optimal functioning.
- Establish a high-quality child care infrastructure to support adult education.

### Illiteracy Eradication, Support for Adult Education and Workplace Learning

- Launch a vigorous all-Ireland adult literacy campaign with a substantially increased budget and a separate budget for the provision of ESL (English as a second language) to newcomer international adults.
- Provide adult education free to all up to third level qualifications, abolish part-time fees and grant part-time students eligibility for maintenance grants.
- Produce a coherent National Strategy on Workplace Learning.
- Introduce paid learning leave for workers with Junior Cert qualifications or less.

## Supporting Our Teachers

- Support appropriate improvement in pay, terms and conditions.
- Cover costs for trainee teachers during their sixteen-week training placement for which they receive no pay.
- Provide increased funding for continuous professional development opportunities.
- Provide laptop computers to all teachers to facilitate greater effectiveness in lesson preparation and administration activities.
- Support teacher exchange schemes between the two jurisdictions on this island and work for the harmonisation of curricula.
- Recognise the seriousness of school indiscipline including bullying, and allocate the necessary supports to assist schools and teachers to promote discipline in schools and ensure a positive learning environment.

## Childcare is a Right

Sinn Féin believes that childcare is a right and policy must be geared to the needs of children and families rather than solely to the needs of the labour market. This State still has one of the lowest rates of childcare provision in the EU. Childcare costs almost one third of the average disposable income of a double-income family. It has become the 'second mortgage'. Many families on lower incomes either cannot get childcare at all, or else must pay a disproportionate amount of their income on massive weekly childcare bills. The lack of quality, affordable childcare prevents many women who wish to do so from working outside the home.

There is an urgent need to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy for childcare provision. While some progress has been made since Sinn Féin first raised this demand in 2004 the Government has been far too slow to act and progress has come very late in its term of office.

## The Sinn Féin Childcare Reform Package

We are proposing State-led provision of regulated comprehensive childcare, to be made available to all equally as of right, and funded by general direct and progressive taxation. This will include universal early childhood education and care, universal pre-school for 3 to 5s, and an afterschool childcare system.

In addition, there needs to be a greater recognition of the economic and social value of parents providing full-time care directly. All parents who wish to spend the first year caring for their child full-time should have the right to be enabled to do so, and employers should provide more flexibility for working parents to provide childcare directly when necessary, without penalty. We also propose that full-time family caring work should be recognised by the pension system through gender neutral Carers' Credits.

## THE SINN FÉIN RECORD IN LEINSTER HOUSE:

- Our Dáil Team sponsored a motion calling for the development of a comprehensive and accessible childcare infrastructure and a wide range of measures to assist parents, whether caring for children full-time in the home or working outside the home and using childcare services.
- We organized a conference on Best Practice in Childcare in Europe, hosted by our MEP MaryLou McDonald under the auspices of Sinn Féin's EU Parliamentary Group GUE/NGL.
- We consulted widely with the childcare sector before publishing our 2005 and 2006 pre-Budget priorities documents Putting Children First and distributed tens of thousands of newsletters throughout the country outlining our proposals and challenging the Government on its failure to deliver.

## SINN Féin PRIORITIES IN GOVERNMENT:

### A Phased Introduction of Universal Childcare as a Right

- Immediately provide for a universal pre-school session of 3.5 hours a day, five days a week for all children aged 3-5 years.
- Expand the National Childcare Investment Programme to increase capital, staffing and operational funding.
- Review the Childcare Facilities Guidelines for Planning Authorities and investigate the introduction of legislation in line with Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000 to require developers to construct childcare facilities in housing developments and to transfer these to the ownership of the local authority upon completion.
- Establish a single accrediting body to inspect, evaluate and register all early childhood care and education providers.
- Establish national pay scale for early childhood care and education workers.
- Introduce universal training and accreditation for childcare workers.
- Centralise childcare provision under a single Department.
- Immediately establish a Childcare Funding Commission to report within a reasonable time-frame on the projected costs of the transition to a comprehensive all-Ireland system of universal childcare provision and to make recommendations on how the State can best harness our resources in the interests of more equitable and efficient delivery.

### Expanded Support for Parents Providing Full-Time Care

- Set a time-frame for the introduction of one year at 100% of pay and introduce two weeks paid paternity leave entitlements (as an interim step towards four weeks leave) to harmonise these rights on an all-Ireland basis.
- Commission a study, including widespread public consultation, to determine the best way to support those parents whose work is in the home caring for their children.
- Introduce gender neutral Carers' Credits into the pension system.