

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland**

**Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills regarding** ‘**the school building programme’ (August 2018)**

**Introduction**

The TUI represents teachers and lecturers (17,000+) employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools and the institutes of technology.

The TUI welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Committee in relation to ‘**the school building programme.**

**Background**

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018; OECD, 2015a; OECD, 2009; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nOg, 2017, Growing Up in Ireland, 2017, IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017, Scanlon & McKenna, 2018; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018) despite spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015b; SJI, 2018; NERI, 2018). The rapidly improving economic situation (OECD, 2017; ESRI, 2018; Central Bank, 2018; EY, 2018; IMF, 2017; EU Commission 2017; NERI, 2018) means that Government is in a good position to make a meaningful contribution to continue supporting students through the provision of proper buildings.

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015). In 2008, we had the second highest proportion of 10-14-year olds in the European Union (CSO, 2009). The high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future. The DES (2012, 2017) suggests that the number of students in the post-primary school system will rise by almost one hundred thousand in second level between 2011 and 2025 (322,528 to 416,897). The latest projections in DPER (2018) are that enrolments in post-primary are expected to rise 12.5% between 2018 and 2024. This creates obvious issues regarding the timely provision of school buildings.

**ASD – Special Classes**

DES data on enrolment patterns indicate that most schools enrol some students with SEN. However, close examination of all relevant data indicates that schools in the ETB and C&C sectors enrol, by far, the largest proportion of students with special needs, representing a vast range in terms of the type and level of need experienced by individual students. Consequently, this leads to considerable variation in the additional support required by individual students and schools in order that special needs be addressed effectively and in a manner that ensures all students are appropriately supported in achieving their potential. As cited in Fischer (2016: 167)

“community schools and vocational or technical schools under VEC (and now ETB) management cater for a much more diverse school population and for a disproportionate number of immigrants or children of immigrants, as the results of the 2008 Department survey clearly showed.”

Bond et al. (2016: 1) found that

“In 2011–12 there were 8,829 students with ASD in the total school population and in 2012–13 this number had increased to 10,719. The majority of these children attended mainstream schools.”

NCSE (2015: 25) found that

“With a prevalence of 1.55 per cent, ASD is no longer a low-incidence special educational category. A school with 600 boys enrolled might expect around seven to have ASD. A similar sized girls’ school might expect around two with ASD. Many schools have fully embraced an open and inclusive policy but we know, from our own experience and through consultations, that some are reluctant to recognise their role in providing a full continuum of provision for students with ASD. Both soft and hard barriers to enrolment remain… Despite the growth and corresponding improvement in educational provision for students with ASD, the availability of appropriate mainstream and special placements continues to be problematic in certain areas of the State, particularly for those with ASD who have more complex learning and/or behavioural difficulties.”

The TUI strongly believes that special classes should be available, in a local school, to all students who require such provision. Neither hard nor soft barriers to admission should prevent a student with ASD from accessing suitable educational provision locally. A recent news report (Irish Times June 4th, 2018) noted significant disparities in the availability of ASD classes in post-primary. Some areas and sectors were very well-served whilst other weren’t.

**Special Educational Needs Generally**

It has been noted above that ETB and C&C sectors enrol, by far, the largest proportion of students with special needs. As a result, many schools in these sectors have a huge number of students receiving one to one tuition. These schools are in dire need of a resource unit, i.e. a suite of small rooms designed for one to one tuition or small groups. At present much of this happens in the canteen or any other space that teachers can find as they do not have spare rooms. This is clearly sub-optimal both in terms of school resourcing and in terms of protecting the dignity of students with SEN.

**Utilising the Expertise of the ETBs**

Many ETBs throughout the country have significant experience in managing large and complex building projects, both in terms of new schools and extensions to existing schools. For example, one ETB has managed a devolved building project which meant that no project management company was required. The ETB in this case hired building expertise in-house and this allowed the project to be completed on time and on budget. This system could be used in other areas, but it would be necessary for ETBs to be adequately resourced to do so. It is also interesting to note that several ETBs are now also providing advice on building projects to some primary schools which are under religious patronage. This model can relieve some of the pressure on the DES Planning and Building Unit in Tullamore.

**Regulations**

New building projects quite rightly need to comply with health and safety regulations, GDPR regulations, preventative maintenance regulations etc. However, that imposes a financial cost, a staffing cost and an opportunity cost. These costs must be adequately factored into the budget allocated by the DES for the project. Furthermore, gaining permission from the DES, obtaining planning permission and then engaging in subsequent procurement processes are all very important and it is right that it should be done. However, it can slow down the building of school facilities by up to a year and a half. This is particularly important when building projects arise from sudden demographic growth in the locality. As regards DES regulations, it would be helpful if a simplified application system could be introduced for necessary works such as resurfacing of a basketball court or removing trees on site that have become dangerous i.e. things that the general budget of a school could not afford. This would also help to speed up processes.

**Ancillary Staffing**

New schools with as many as one thousand students only get an ancillary staffing allocation of one caretaker, one administrative person and one cleaner. This is woefully inadequate even if the school were only to be open for eight hours a day. However, many schools, especially Community Colleges and Community Schools, are open late into the night for community meetings etc. Ongoing maintenance is, of course, a requirement for all buildings but newly built school buildings are at risk of losing their warranties on the building if specific maintenance is not carried out and recorded as such. It is very difficult to do this when there is only one caretaker. An analogy would be if a company spent €15m buying a new aeroplane but didn’t have anyone to service it. Very rapidly it would become apparent that poor value for money was being achieved. A small investment in staffing to maintain ongoing maintenance would pay dividends in the end.

**Bathroom Facilities**

It is of course essential for school buildings to have adequate bathroom facilities. This must, for example, take account of the needs of Transgender students. Furthermore, there can be problems in terms of providing facilities for staff and older students when second-level schools are temporarily housed in primary school buildings. This shall be dealt with in more detail later. In the context of the desire for more people to cycle to work, it would also be helpful if showering facilities were available to staff.

**Building Costs**

The ongoing growth in the economy (OECD, 2017; ESRI, 2018; Central Bank, 2018; EY, 2018; IMF, 2017; EU Commission 2017) may have an impact in terms of building costs inflation. This needs to be taken into account when budgets are being drawn up for building projects. As outlined above, it is not unusual for several years to pass from the need for a new or expanded school being identified and the actual building being completed. In that time costs can rise unexpectedly. This is particularly important for schools in very remote areas. In that case costs are often significantly higher than in urban areas due to a shortage of building companies being available. Furthermore, schools in very remote areas may also encounter difficulty in linking up with public infrastructure such as road and water systems. This can cost further delays and costs. It is also essential that money be provided to update heating systems in older school buildings.

As regards the ETB and C&C sectors in particular, it should be noted that the DES Planning and Building Unit in Tullamore gauges school needs based on student numbers and corresponding floor area. Schools in the ETB and C&C sectors have a large number of technical rooms, much more that the voluntary secondary sector. Technical rooms are, by their nature, much bigger meaning that ETB/C&C schools need a bigger footprint for the same number of students. This leads on to the other issue of cleaning staff which was mentioned above. In effect, the same inadequate staffing levels are provided but there is a bigger area to clean.

In the overall context it may be beneficial to allow a 5% contingency for each capital project devolved to an ETB and must be signed off and accounted for by the Employer’s Representative. Furthermore, it should be possible to lower the amount of administration involved in dealing with the DES. It should also be possible for ETBs and schools to have direct access to the DES Technical Team in terms of accessing assistance in progressing projects.

Some science labs were built thirty years ago and since then only updated to the extent of gas proofing or plumbing. Flooring is no longer slip-proof but making it slip-proof again costs up to €8k and that shouldn’t come from capitation. Furthermore, the maintenance guidelines from the DES date back to 1990s.

**Temporary Buildings**

In areas of high demographic growth, there is often significant pressure on existing schools to expand rapidly through the addition of modular buildings (hereby after referred to as pre-fabs). In extreme cases, such pre-fabs have had to be put upon playing fields and playgrounds. This creates obvious difficulties for schools when they are trying to encourage students to engage in sporting activities.

**Building Contracts**

The TUI has a concern about the possible excessive use of private sector contractors in the school building programme. Recent difficulties with the equipping and maintenance of schools built under Public Private Partnerships give us pause for thought. Furthermore, the recent difficulties encountered by some school building projects following the collapse of large contracting firms means that the TUI would prefer that over-reliance on such types of contracts should be prevented where possible.

**Curricular Needs**

Some schools do not have access to sufficient (or in some cases any) PE hall, science laboratories, home economics kitchens, woodwork/engineering rooms etc. This will become an even more urgent issue when the revised Junior Cycle is fully rolled out. Its emphasis on experiential learning requires adequate facilities for such learning to take place. Recent, and upcoming, changes in Senior Cycle also create a buildings facilities issue. For example, new exam subjects such as Computer Science and PE have been warmly welcomed by the TUI. However, it is important that appropriately resourced rooms be available for those subjects to reach their potential. At present some schools are struggling to provide any room, never mind an appropriately resourced one. This also applies to curricular programmes such as Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational and Transition Year. Each of those programmes requires students to have access to rooms which facilitate group activities. Sports halls and canteen facilities should be available by default in all new builds irrespective of size and the Summer Works Scheme should be extended with a ring-fenced budget to retro fit schools with gym and eating facilities (hot kitchen etc).

In relation to ICT in particular, the TUI notes the current debate on mobile ICT devices and the DES Digital Strategy. The TUI does not intend to comment on either in this submission as the TUI previously addressed the issue in a submission to the DES in 2014. However, there is an issue which does arise in relation to buildings and ICT. It is important that an adequately resourced system of hardware, software and ICT infrastructure be provided in all school buildings. In relation to hardware, tablets have their uses but are often not suitable for quality project work as required for Junior Cycle. Furthermore, the ICT grant issuing each year, while very welcome, is barely enough to renew existing outdated and worn out hardware.

**Further Education (FE)**

The FE sector often has very particular needs both due to the Increased specialisation for the programmes provided, the numbers of students present and the older age profile of those students. It is vital that adequate funding is required for FE capital projects.

**New schools temporarily being housed in primary schools**

To begin with, the TUI would like to put on record the gratitude of our members to our colleagues in the primary sector for the goodwill shown by primary schools ‘hosting’ second-level schools while awaiting the construction of their own building. However, despite the best efforts of all involved, a number of problems frequently crop up in these scenarios:

* Science laboratory. In some cases, a general classroom has had a label put on the door calling it a science lab but may only have a sink. There is no gas etc. It is sometimes on the top floor of the building so can’t even use gas cylinders due to health and safety concerns. It is really a Science laboratory in name only.
* In a similar manner to the Science laboratory, a general classroom may be called a Home Economics room but only have four cookers. This is clearly not adequate for a full Home Economics class.
* At least one school had to take Technology off the timetable as no subject specific facilities were available. This was despite the intense desire of the school to provide as many STEM subjects as possible.
* In one school, a Science laboratory and a Home Economics room were bizarrely in one single room together and that was within a pre-fab. The room couldn’t be used because of the obvious health and safety risk.
* Often there are no sports facilities suitable for teenagers.
* In at least one case, 16-year-old second-level students are in the same building as primary school children. This raises concerns about interactions between the two age groups.

**Meeting Demographic Needs**

As well as ensuring that there is an adequate number of school places within an area, it is also important for the DES to ensure that provision of types of schools can be accessed by parents. For example, the building of a Gaelcholaiste for North Kerry was recently approved. It is the only Gaelcholaiste in the entire North Kerry area so parents wishing to access an Irish-medium education for their children have had to commute long distances.

In relation to the amalgamation of existing schools it is important that all stakeholders make a meaningful contribution to ensuring successful completion of the amalgamation process. It has been reported to the TUI that some patron bodies are not demonstrating commitment to the amalgamation process.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from the above that the School Buildings Programme, despite the best efforts of those involved, is not keeping pace with the rapid demographic and curricular changes happening in second-level and further education. This is to say nothing of the challenges being encountered by Institutes of Technology in developing new facilities though that is beyond the immediate boundaries of this submission. The TUI believes that significant changes need to be made and welcomes the interest shown by the Oireachtas Committee in examining this issue.

**Recommendations**

In the interest of students, staff and communities, the TUI recommends the following:

* Significant investment is required for both the building of new schools and the modernisation/expansion of existing schools.
* Curricular needs and changes to curriculum must be taken into account in terms of deciding building projects and the resources attached to same.
* Building cost inflation, and the time required to get approval for buildings, need to be factored into budgets, as does the additional costs of building in remote areas.
* Provision must be made for additional resources for schools in relation to maintenance, fire safety and Health & Safety.
* Each school should have a dedicated Facilities Manager who would ensure each school is compliant with the above and take the day to day compliance responsibility away from the Principals.
* There should be updated guidance on buildings management.
* There could perhaps be centralised buildings management by resourcing ETBs to do it for all schools.
* A small number of schools seem to be reluctant to agree extensions if the extension is recommended for the provision of special classes. Recent legislation prevents ‘soft exclusion’ in admissions criteria but lack of building space doesn’t prevent ‘soft exclusion’. All schools and sectors should be welcoming of students with SEN, and have the necessary buildings and facilities to enable inclusion.
* Ancillary staffing allocations should be increased.
* Adequate bathroom facilities should be provided.
* The unique needs of new schools temporarily being housed in primary schools, must be taken into account.
* All stakeholders should play a role in ensuring that school amalgamations can be carried out successfully.
* A simplified application system could be introduced for necessary works.

Ends.

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**Glossary**

ASD Autism Spectrum Disorder

CSO Central Statistics Office

C&C Community and Comprehensive

DES Department of Education and Skills

DPER Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

ETB Education and Training Board

EU European Union

FE Further Education

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation

ICT Information and Communications Technology

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PE Physical Education

SEN Special Educational Needs

STEM Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

TUI Teachers’ Union of Ireland

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