

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland**

**Response to School Uniform and Associated Costs Consultation**

**(November 2016)**

Introduction

TUI represents c.16,300 teachers and lecturers. In October 2016, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) invited submissions on the issue of a new circular on school uniforms and associated costs. TUI welcomes this opportunity to address the issue. This issue is complex and requires schools to balance many competing rights and responsibilities.

Key Issues

TUI believes that previous DES recommendations on school uniforms were pragmatic and fully respected the various religious backgrounds of students in our schools while taking account of the legal position. Such pragmatic guidelines also take account of the fact that many families have experienced financial hardship. For example, statistics show that approximately one in ten children lives in consistent poverty and one in four lives in relative poverty (NESF, 2005; CSO, 2009; Barnardos, 2008; Hayes, 2008). These figures largely pre-date the economic recession so there must logically be a concern that the consistent poverty rate may in fact be higher now.

**Capitation Funding**

It is important to note that cuts to capitation payments have resulted in schools struggling to fund essential needs. Hence, many schools have found themselves having to pass some costs on to parents/guardians. This clearly has a disproportionate effect on families of low or modest means and is an insupportable, if unintended, consequence of emergency measures that must now be reversed.

Therefore, it is essential that the DES reverses the 11% cut applied to capitation funding between 2011 and 2015 (Irish Independent, May 19th 2016). It is also essential that the DES brings to an end the misguided practice of favouring the voluntary secondary sector in relation to capitation payments. This practice has resulted from a campaign of misinformation by the managerial authorities for the voluntary secondary sector regarding the level of subvention to the ETB sector which incorrectly posits that the effective student capitation grant in the ETB sector is disproportionately high.

**State funding of fee-paying schools**

Furthermore, there should be a further reduction in state support for schools that employ exclusionary practices and that raise very significant annual revenue through the application of fees. Specifically, the TUI asks that such schools be required to repay to the state the full economic cost of each unit of teacher allocation from the fee income they generate, subject only to the retention of such income as is equivalent to the capitation grant that a school of similar size in the state system would receive. An Irish Times report in 2012 (Jan 3rd) stated that 56 schools (out of approximately 730 second-level schools and 3200 primary schools in the country) received income of €227m annually, which included “over €121 million in gross fee income and €89 million in payment for teacher salaries”.

These distortions in state funding policy result in ETB and C&C schools being denied a level of capitation that would obviate the need to seek financial contributions from parents for the purchase of essential items. While not directly addressing the cost of school uniforms, implementation of the measures suggested above would reduce other costs incurred by parents/families in respect of schooling.

**Uniforms**

Specifically in regard to uniforms, TUI believes that parents should not be put in the position of having to pay for school uniforms that are needlessly expensive.

Pragmatic guidelines issued by the Department of Education and Skills in 2008 recommended that:

* The pre-existing system, whereby schools decide their uniform policy at a local level, is reasonable, works and should be maintained.
* In this context, no school uniform policy should act in such a way that it, in effect, excludes students of a particular religious background from seeking enrolment or continuing their enrolment in a school. However, this statement does not recommend the wearing of clothing in the classroom which obscures a facial view and creates an artificial barrier between pupil and teacher. Such clothing hinders proper communication.
* Schools, when drawing up their uniform policy, should consult widely in the school community.
* Schools should take note of the obligations placed on them by the Equal Status Acts before setting down a school uniform policy. They should also be mindful of the Education Act, 1998. As previously mentioned, this obliges boards of management to take account of ‘the principles and requirements of a democratic society and have respect and promote respect for the diversity of values, beliefs, traditions, languages and ways of life in society’.

TUI believes that, as a general principle and respecting the importance of consultation with stakeholders at local level, generic uniforms are perfectly satisfactory and can result in significantly reduced costs for parents/families. Where sports clothing is required it again should, where possible, be of the generic type. In this regard, it is important that local consultation take place to evaluate the best solution for each individual school community.

While the issue of competitive tendering may seem attractive, the theory that this will inevitably lead to lower costs or will tend to contain costs has not always been borne out in practice. Competitive tendering can lead to domination of a captive market by a small number of large suppliers and give rise to cartel effects in cost terms. Moreover, it can be plausibly argued that local suppliers who price their goods competitively should be favoured and that the development of a school’s links with the local community and economy is a valid consideration.

TUI also believes that, where possible, parents should be able to purchase school uniforms from more than one source. The issue of competitive tendering seems to make sense but it must be borne in mind that schools are under tremendous pressure to carry out many diverse government initiatives and hence time and/or expertise to carry out competitive tendering processes may not be available in some schools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, TUI would like to support the retention of uniform guidelines similar to those previously published by the DES. TUI also recognises that schools are acutely aware of the financial pressures on parents and that schools work hard to minimise the financial burden on parents. Sadly schools frequently find themselves having to seek financial support from parents to enable the purchase of essential equipment for the school. The DES has a responsibility to provide a capitation grant to schools that realistically addresses the cost of running a school. In this submission, and in its recent pre-Budget submissions, TUI has put forward suggestions as to how such increases in the capitation grant could be funded.

**Ends**

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References

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