



Teachers' Union of Ireland

Response to invitation by the Joint Committee on Education and Youth to make a submission on the review of the School Meals programme.

(January 2026)

Introduction

The TUI would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission.

The TUI represents teachers, lecturers and staff (21,500+) in Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools, Youthreach, institutes of technology and technological universities and those working in out of school services.

Background

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system and a respected teaching profession (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018a; OECD, 2015a; Comhairle na nOg, 2017; Growing Up in Ireland, 2017; Boyle, 2017; Boyle, 2019; Scanlon & McKenna, 2018; Kantar Millward Brown, 2018; EU Commission, 2018; EU Commission, 2019a; EU Commission, 2019b; Social Progress Initiative, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2018; HEA, 2019; Coolahan, 2017; Eivers, 2019; CSO, 2019a; McKeown et al., 2019; CSO, 2020b; OECD, 2020a; Clerkin and Perkins, 2020; Clark & Kavanagh, 2021; OECD, 2021a; CSO, 2021; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021; Indecon, 2020; Purdy et al., 2021; CSO, 2022a; DE, 2021b; Smyth et al., 2022; Gabriel et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2022; Delaney et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2023; OECD, 2023a; OECD, 2024b; DoE, 2025; Singleton, 2025; Gilmore & Singleton, 2024; OECD, 2025c; McHugh et al., 2024; Conroy, 2025). Conroy (2025: 54) pointedly states that in relation to its education system

“Ireland spends less than the European average but delivers above-average results. This suggests strong efficiency in education spending”.

AI this was achieved despite Ireland spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015; SJI, 2018; NERI, 2018; OECD, 2019a; UNDP, 2019; OECD, 2021a; Kovacic et al., 2021; CSO, 2022a; Clark et al., 2022; OECD, 2023b; OECD, 2024b; Gilmore & Singleton, 2024; OECD, 2025c) and experiencing historic underinvestment (DES, 2018b). DCEDIY (2024) has reported that the proportion of GDP spent on education in Ireland actually fell from 3.58% in 2016 to 2.87% in 2021 despite rising student enrolments (CSO, 2023c). QQI (2023) also acknowledged a need for significant capital investment, especially in FE buildings in the ETB sector. The CSO (2022a) has stated that real expenditure per student in post-primary fell 5.8% between 2008 and 2018, and real expenditure per student in higher education fell 35%. Ireland also has the 8th largest class sizes in upper secondary in all of the EU/EFTA and EU candidate countries. In higher education, Ireland has extraordinarily large class sizes by international comparison i.e. 23:1 compared to 15:1 (OECD, 2021a). Despite this, citizen satisfaction with the education system in Ireland is the highest of any of 22 European countries studied by Boyle (2018) whilst parent satisfaction with the Irish education system was the second highest out of fifty-six countries in Clerkin et al. (2020). Boyle (2021; 2023) found a high level of citizenship satisfaction with the education system in Ireland as well as Ireland being fourth in Europe in its ability to meet the needs of a competitive economy and also a greater ability by students in Ireland than the European average to deal with unusual situations and to overcome difficulties. Boyle et al. (2022) made broadly similar findings.

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2019; DCYA, 2020; DCEDIY, 2024; Conroy, 2025) despite some declines in younger age groups recently (CSO, 2024a). DCEDIY (2024: 19) noted that

“In 2023, Ireland had the highest estimated proportion of children in the European Union (23.4%). The EU-27 average was 18.0%.”

The previously high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2019) and ongoing rate of natural increase (CSO, 2022c; CSO, 2022d) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future, especially after factoring in recent increases in inward migration (CSO, 2024b). Whilst we are past ‘peak baby’ and recently, ‘peak child’ (NESC, 2025), the student population in post-primary is likely to remain high for a considerable time to come (DEY, 2025). In this context, it is not credible to suggest that a world-class learner-centred public education system can be achieved with inadequate resources of time or personnel. Population growth generally is very significant, and this has implications for the entire lifelong learning agenda. CSO data has shown that the overall population rose 97,600 in the year to April 2023, and one-fifth of the rise was natural increase (Irish Times, September 26th, 2023). CSO (2024b) found another increase in population of almost 100,000 people in the year to April 2024. However, in terms of

overall expenditure on education Ireland has a history of chronic under-investment. Ireland and Greece were the only EU member states in 2015 to spend significantly less than the UN SDG 4 minimum of 4% of GDP on education (UNESCO, 2022). The DES (2018b) has itself acknowledged “historic underinvestment”. Conroy (2025) has also pointed to historic under-investment in the Irish education system especially when adjusted for the size of the youth population. Conroy (2025) also points to the high financial return achieved from investment in education in Ireland, especially in the higher education system.

The growing economy (ESRI, 2021; EU Commission, 2021; OECD, 2021b; IBEC, 2021; Central Bank, 2022; IMF, 2021; CSO, 2022b; ESRI, 2022a; ESRI, 2022b; CSO, 2023a; IBEC, 2023; Central Bank, 2023, EU Commission, 2024; Central Bank, 2024a; ESRI, 2024; Central Bank, 2024b; McQuinn et al., 2024; OECD, 2025a; CSO, 2025a; KPMG, 2025a; KPMG, 2025b; Conroy, 2025; CSO, 2025c), and healthy Government finances (CSO, 2023b) means that Government is in a good position to make a meaningful contribution to continued support for students from under-represented target groups and/or migrant and refugee communities. This positive economic outlook is projected to continue despite recent turmoil in international trade (Central Bank, 2025a; ESRI, 2025; CSO, 2025c). GDP and unemployment data in Ireland continue to be encouraging (Eurostat, 2025). Indeed the Central Bank (2025b) is predicting robust economic growth up to, and including, 2028. Conroy (2025) and NESC (2025) have noted that the current strong labour market demand in the economy generally requires ongoing inward migration.

School Meals

The TUI notes the Department of Social Protection 2022 evaluation of the school meal programme. The TUI is strongly in favour of the school meals programme and believes that it should be more extensively available in post-primary schools than is currently the case. It also believes that the burden of providing school meals should fall on the commercial companies providing the meals, rather than on already overburdened school staff. Provision of free at point of provision school meals, especially nutritious hot meals, contributes significantly to school attendance and attention by students (WFP, 2019), especially for the most vulnerable students. It also contributes to the overall school community. It also reduces costs for parents.

Governance and Co-ordination

The TUI is concerned that there appears to be a lack of clarity in terms of which Government department will be responsible for the school meals programme into the future. As a programme rolled out in schools, it would be the preference of the TUI that the programme be operated by the Department of Education and Youth if possible. The TUI also believes that the level of administration of the scheme at local level is an excessive burden on schools, especially small schools, and that it should be taken 'in-house' by the Department. There is also a concern that large suppliers of school meal services are able to avail of economies of scale in setting procurement prices, whilst small local producers, who could perhaps provide hot meals to local schools in a particular catchment area, simply can't compete on price though may be able to compete on quality.

Access and Inclusion

There is currently an inherent unfairness in that some schools can avail of the scheme and others can't. Even within the cohort of post-primary schools that can avail of the scheme, many cannot avail of the hot meals option. Promotion of the scheme also suffers because of the absence of HSCLs in every school. These staff play a vital role in liaising between home and school. The same is also true of the absence of key pastoral care staff such as year heads who can support students to access the meals programme and to make the most of it. Where students manifest a possible eating disorder, guidance counsellors are a key point of reference for the student, family and school as a whole. There needs to be a greater allocation of ringfenced guidance provision to school to be the first port of call for a student displaying issues around eating.

Sustainability

There have been many reports to the TUI, from schools, of significant levels of wasted or unused food. This creates a cleaning problem for schools as well as wasted taxpayer money. The TUI suggests that the DSP may wish to examine whether the quality, variety and nutritional value of the food may or may not be contributing to the volume of food waste. Furthermore, in some cases, waste has been generated through the absence of appropriate food storage facilities in schools. It is essential that all schools in the meals programme be provided with satisfactory food storage and disposal facilities. It should be the role of the companies providing the food to also provide the storage necessary. Schools shouldn't be incurring costs to provide the meals programme to their students. School funding is already grossly insufficient.

It is important that the companies providing the food also provide the equipment to ensure that good quality, nutritious, varied, appetising, food meals can be accessed rather than just the cold alternative. The TUI is also aware of some situations in which food is delivered to facilities, in one notable case a shed, outside schools in the middle of the night. Whilst the TUI doesn't hold itself out in any way as an expert in food safety, we would imagine that this is less than ideal. It also puts the burden on school staff and students to arrange food distribution. The

burden of distribution should fall on the company providing the food; companies which presumably have experts in food safety on staff.

The TUI notes that the issue of food waste is an environmental one as well as an economic one. Schools are having to pay for waste disposal and in some cases are requiring students to bring food waste home with them as the school waste service is becoming overwhelmed. It should also be noted that some school meal providers supply disposable cutlery and plates. Whilst understandable, and welcome in some respects, disposable cutlery is further adding to the sheer quantity of material entering bin collections in schools.

School Attendance

As noted in the DSP 2022 review of the scheme, provision of school meals has improved attendance. This is particularly important in the context of the truly chronic levels of absenteeism of students since Covid. It is estimated by Tusla that approximately ten percent of school days are being lost in primary and post-primary schools in recent years (TESS, 2024). This requires more than a meals programme to address however. It is essential that HSCLs, year heads and guidance staff be available to support students and families experiencing difficulty in terms of school attendance.

Conclusion

Schools and other education settings are doing an excellent job in terms of providing the schools meals programme. Schools have an important role to play in the area of healthy eating, but responsibilities also rest with parents, communities and the relevant Government departments and aegis bodies. The American educationalist Larry Cuban once said that “when society gets an itch schools get scratched”.

Recommendations

The TUI would like to make the following recommendations to the Committee:

- All schools should have access to hot school meals.
- The scheme has positive impacts on students who can avail of it currently, and hence it should be rolled out to all students in all schools.
- All schools should have access to HSCLs, and not just DEIS schools.
- The relevant Government departments should continue to ensure that ‘super-processed’ foods are avoided in school meals menus.
- There should be additional provision of guidance teachers to all schools.
- There needs to be more pastoral supports in schools, especially year head positions.
- Storage, distribution and heating of food should be the responsibility of the company providing the food.

- Additional cleaning and caretaking supports need to be made available to schools.
- There needs to be clarity around which Government department is responsible for the school meals programme into the future.

Ends

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Glossary

C&C	Community and Comprehensive	
CSO	Central Statistics Office	
DCDE	Department of Children, Disability and Equality	
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (now DCDE)	
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs	(now DCDE)
DE	Department of Education	(Now DEY)
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools	
DES	Department of Education and Skills	(Now DEY)
DEY	Department of Education and Youth	
DoE	Department of Education	(Now DEY)
DSP	Department of Social Protection	
EFTA	European Free Trade Association	
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute	
ETB	Education and Training Board	
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland	
EU	European Union	
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	
HEA	Higher Education Authority	
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation	
IMF	International Monetary Fund	
NERI	Nevin Economic Research Institute	
NESC	National Economic and Social Council	
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland	

SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SJI	Social Justice Ireland
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland

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