

## TIME TO RETURN TO FREE EDUCATION

## **6 SIMPLE STEPS**

"The State shall provide for free primary education"

Article 42.4 of the Constitution

The costs of sending children to primary and secondary school and to third level has increased exponentially over recent years. The development of a reliance by schools on voluntary contributions from parents and the growing costs of school books has been part of the increased financial burden placed on parents. Many parents believe there is no such thing as free education any more.

Education in this state has never been properly funded. According to the OECD Education at a Glance report, education spending in Ireland was the fourth lowest among 31 OECD states during the peak years of the celtic tiger. The figures are based on trends in 2007 and do not take account of the cuts in the education service since then.

As unemployment grows and incomes fall due to wage cuts and increased taxes for the low paid, more and more parents are finding it a struggle to find the money to send their children back to school each September. Depending on the age of the child this can cost anything from €300 to €800. The absence of school book lending schemes means that purchasing books is a huge struggle for parents. In a survey in July 2010 children's charity Barnardos found that the majority of survey respondents (58%) experienced an increase in the amount they have had to spend on school books in 2010 compared to 2009.

Other costs are also increasing. Secondary school students will now have to pay €350 a year for school transport. This is an increase of €50 from last year. Primary school students will now have to pay a yearly school transport fee of €50 where no charge previously existed.

The Bank of Ireland Life report estimates the cost of education per child, from Junior Infants through to third level at somewhere around €70,000, with €14,000 spent on secondary school education alone.. Due to cutbacks and inadequate capitation grants schools are finding themselves forced to fundraise more and more to keep afloat. This requires significant donations or so called 'voluntary' contributions from parents who are already struggling to make ends meet.

Article 42.4 of the 1937 Constitution states "The State shall provide for free primary education". That obligation is not being upheld. A return to free education has to be a cornerstone of building a better Ireland. We have to recognise that education is key to economic recovery and enabling every child to reach their potential.

Educational disadvantage means that over 1,000 children per year do not progress from primary to secondary school. We cannot allow children to be left behind or to drop out of education because their parents cannot meet the increased costs needed to them to school. We cannot allow schools in disadvantaged areas to be left behind because parents in those areas have less money to fund schools through voluntary contributions.

In our 2011 pre-budget submission Sinn Féin showed how we fund our public services such as education in a way that is fair including asking those who have more to pay more. We have shown that public services such as education can be spared from cuts.

It is time to bring back fairness in education. We would ensure that public money is used to deliver better education for all children:

- >> We would end the state subsidy for private education.
- >> We would cap the salaries of university and college heads at €100,000.

Sinn Féin is committed to making free education a reality.

## SINN FÉIN IS COMMITTED TO:

- End the system where schools are reliant on voluntary contributions from parents by raising the capitation grants to cover the real cost of running a school.
- 2) Establish a book-lending scheme across all primary and secondary schools.
- Cap the cost of school transport at €100 per year, maintain free transport for primary school children.
- 4) Abolish the charge for the leaving certificate and junior cert and for the mocks.
- 5) Extend eligibility for the Back to School Allowance to include all families in receipt of Family Income Supplement in addition to those in receipt of social welfare.
- 6) Oppose the reintroduction of third level fees through any guise and reform the grants system to take into account the real costs of going to college.