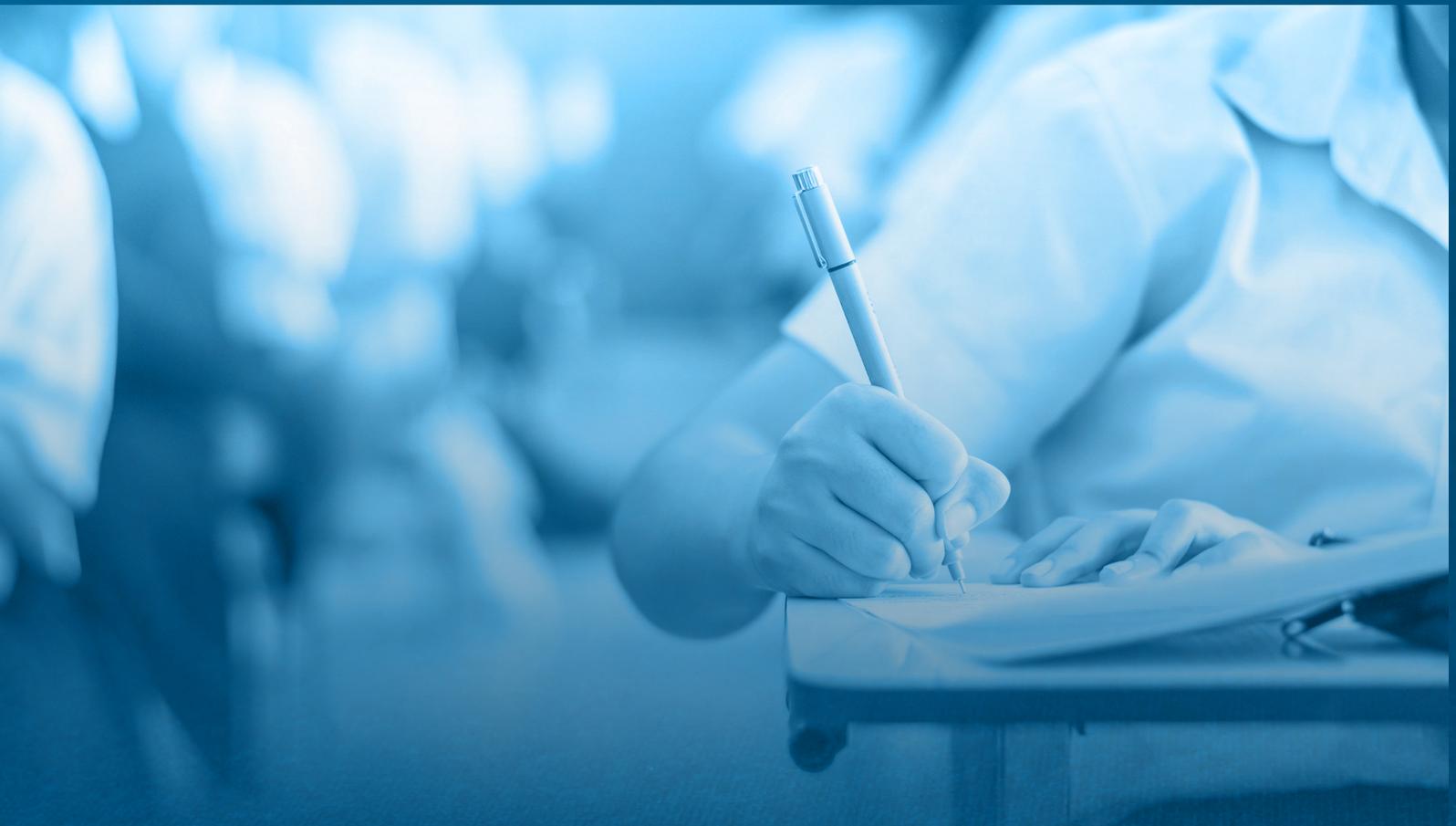




# EDUCATION

SINN FÉIN PROPOSALS  
ELECTION 2020



JANUARY 2020



## MAKING FREE EDUCATION A REALITY

Free Education is a myth, a concept alone. In practice, education is expensive from primary level right up to third level. That needs to change.

At primary and post-primary level, we see ever increasing costs in sending children back to school. Every summer, parents are put to the pin of their collar trying to organise uniforms, shoes, books, 'voluntary contributions', and much more.

More than any other time of year, it becomes abundantly clear that free Primary and Secondary Education in this state is not a reality. Parents have to fork out, on average, €949 to get their children ready for primary school and €1,399 to send them to secondary school. As a result, many children miss out on extracurricular activities or school trips which is a deeply unfair position to put parents in. The vast majority of parents get no assistance whatsoever with Back to School Costs.

When it comes to students studying at a third-level institution, the notion of 'free fees' is also a myth. In reality, the annual student contribution charged more than trebled over the past decade, while the cost of living, particularly rent, has grown exponentially.

In addition, the maintenance grant was cut and restricted under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments during the economic downturn and no sufficient attempts have been made by either party to restore them. Our third-level education system is simply not accessible to all. In fact, it is becoming less accessible to many on the basis of financial means.

Not only does this impact on the students themselves on an individual basis, it creates a stratified education system where only those who have access to finance have the opportunity to pursue whichever career path they wish to follow.

As a party, we are committed to equal access and opportunity for all students to study whatever course they believe suits them, without financial barriers. This would mean abolishing all third-level fees across all courses and public institutions in order to give everyone the chance to further their education if they so wish.

Higher Education has been chronically underfunded for close to a decade now. This neglect must end.

### SINN FÉIN PRIORITIES:

- **Introducing a €140 Back to School Bonus Child Benefit Payment for every child paid at the start of July at an annual cost of €173 million**
- **Introducing legislative measures to ensure schools make uniforms affordable and giving power to the Ombudsman for Children to investigate and make recommendations in that regard.**
- **Providing free school books to all children.**
- **Ending schools' reliance on so-called voluntary contributions by increasing core capitation funding to schools and legislating to end the contributions.**
- **Abolishing third level student fees at a cost of €236 million**
- **Increasing the student maintenance grant by 10%.**
- **Ensuring that adequate funding is provided to Higher Education institutions to the benefit of students, staff and the wider economy alike**



## PRIORITISING SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act was established in 2004, yet several of its provisions have yet to be commenced, including the right of a child with special educational needs to an assessment, the right to an independent appeals process, the right to an individual educational plan, and the delivery of education services on foot of this plan.

Sinn Féin would bring forward and fully enact a new rights-based Education (Overcoming the Barriers) Bill and allocate the resources necessary to implement it via increased Education and Health Budgets. This Bill would, for example, make it mandatory for the Department's Inspectorate to report on the implementation of Individual Education Plans for children with special educational needs.

The National Council for Special Education does not have power under current legislation to designate a place for a child with special educational needs or to require that sufficient classes are established to support children with complex needs or those on the autism spectrum. Sinn Féin would ensure that these needs are met by providing the NCSE with the necessary statutory powers.

We would also provide for a robust appeals mechanism to allow parents and schools appeal an allocation under the new resource allocation model.

The role of the resource teacher within the school setting is fundamental to ensuring all children continue to prosper within their educational environment. We recognise that this support and the support provided by SNAs are critical for children with special educational needs to access and participate in education.

Evidence shows that in-school speech and language therapy is hugely beneficial. It allows therapy to take place in a natural and comfortable environment for the child and makes attendance at appointments much easier. All schools should be able to arrange in-school appointments in conjunction with their local HSE network team.

Sinn Féin recognises the vital role Educational Psychologists play in ensuring every child has access to the supports and resources they need to gain the most from the education experience. We will increase funding for educational psychologists. This will reduce waiting lists for schools and ensure they are adequately equipped to assess and manage the additional needs of all students.

Finally, smaller class sizes are important for all children to reach their educational potential and critically so for those with special educational needs.

### SINN FÉIN PRIORITIES:

- **Providing the NCSE with greater powers to ensure that sufficient school places and classes are provided, and the needs of children are met alongside robust appeals mechanisms**
- **Reducing waiting times for assessments and resourcing supports for students with special educational needs, including proper access to therapies.**
- **Recruiting additional educational psychologists along with greater administrative support to make better use of their time.**
- **Providing funding for the recruitment of 500 additional SNAs and 450 additional Resource Teachers over and above those required to meet demographic pressures.**
- **Establishing an initial panel of 200 speech and language therapists for schools as a shared resource**
- **Reducing the Student/Teacher ratio to 21:1 at primary level**



## TACKLING EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

Sinn Féin would expand the DEIS scheme as just one of a suite of measures to tackle the postcode lottery that is educational disadvantage. This would allow increased resourcing of schools that require additional supports for principals, staff and students.

The Education Act 1998 originally provided for a statutory body to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on relevant policy initiatives to address Educational Disadvantage. The work of the Committee established under this provision was critical in the design of the DEIS scheme.

It was abolished in 2012; however, we believe that this Committee needs to be re-established in order to provide research and direction to the Minister in order to address educational disadvantage in light of increased child poverty rates and the particular problems faced by minority groups such as travellers and homeless children.

In order to fund the reduction of class sizes in primary schools from which all children can benefit, Sinn Féin would phase out public subsidies to private schools.

Funding for the School Completion Programme, which assists children through school and after school supports, has been cut drastically in the last decade. Not only is additional funding required for the programme, but we also think it should be expanded to assist more students.

### SINN FÉIN PRIORITIES:

- **Increasing funding for the DEIS scheme by 20%, enabling approximately 200 additional schools to avail of supports**
- **Re-establish the Statutory Committee to advise the Minister in initiatives to address educational disadvantage**
- **Ending public subsidies to private schools**
- **Ensuring full time Guidance Counsellor for every secondary school and an additional position for schools over 500 pupils.**
- **Increasing investment in the School Completion Programme by €8 million or almost one third.**

## FREE SCHOOL TRANSPORT

In our Alternative Budget for 2020, Sinn Féin committed to abolishing school transport costs to all those who currently avail of the scheme at a cost of roughly €16 million.

Sinn Féin in government would carry out a full review of the operation of the value for money recommendations of the school transport scheme from a child rights perspective.

The current scheme is grossly underfunded, and completely inflexible. Sinn Féin want to make travel to and from school free to all pupils.

In terms of congestion, emissions and quality of life, school traffic is a fixture of modern life that we could all do without.

Sinn Féin is proposing an investment of €66 million additional resources for the School Transport Scheme to help alleviate the stress and the cost of the trip to school.

Our decade long ambition is to deliver free school transport for every child and, in our first term of government, we would introduce free travel for the children availing of the School Transport Scheme at a cost of €16 million and invest an additional €50 million to increase the number of children who can avail of the scheme by 50,000.

We will set up a taskforce to decide in advance of next September how best this money can help. The taskforce will be given a number of priority areas to consider:

- Where the investment will have a significant impact on congestion
- Where the extra resources can allow siblings avail of the same services
- Examining the distance rule to see if a reduction would be beneficial
- The needs of rural Ireland and more sparsely populated areas

Many more children will benefit from our complementary proposal to introduce free fares on public transport for the under 18s.

### **SINN FÉIN PRIORITY:**

- **Reducing costs for families by introducing free travel for the under 18s on all public transport and the School Transport Scheme**

## **PROMOTING DIGITAL LITERACY**

Sinn Féin have proposed a Bill to establish the office of Digital Safety Commissioner. While it would not be a silver bullet that addresses all of our concerns about children being safe online, it would go a long way towards making the spaces in which they operate a more transparent and positive environment.

It is widely acknowledged that online safety in particular is the Child Protection issue of our time, and our Bill has garnered the support of the ISPCC, Cybersafe Ireland, the Children's Ombudsman, and Ireland's Special Rapporteur on Child Protection.

Sinn Féin believe that it is essential that all children benefit from a basic standard of digital literacy, and education at both primary and secondary level schools is pivotal to this.

We also believe that every school needs a digital champion, an appointed a teacher or principal, who can lead on policy development, support, and delivery of digital literacy and digital wellbeing education to children, parents, and teachers.

### **SINN FÉIN PRIORITIES:**

- **Establishing an Office of Digital Safety Commissioner**
- **Digital champions to promote digital literacy in all schools**



## SUPPORTING ADULT LITERACY & NUMERACY

Ireland is currently placed 17th in literacy and 18th in numeracy out of 24 countries as per the latest CSO report on Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies. One in every six people have difficulties with the basics of reading and writing, and one in every four people have issues with numeracy.

While successive governments have failed to address such startling issues, a Sinn Féin government would ensure that those with difficulties in literacy and numeracy would have their needs addressed; and would put an end to any stigma attached to the difficulties.

### SINN FÉIN PRIORITIES:

- **A cross-departmental approach to literacy, and the development of a Government Strategy to increase literacy and numeracy,**
- **A Plain Language Act which makes both state and public services materials more accessible to readers,**
- **Appointment of a Junior Minister with responsibility for the implementation of the strategy.**

## TRANSITIONING BEYOND POST-PRIMARY LEVEL EDUCATION

There are countless schools across the state that are underrepresented when it comes to third level and where, unfortunately, many young people miss out on opportunities due to obstacles relating to income, culture, support, and disability.

Across the state, we lack significant alternative opportunities for young people to pursue other education and training, such as limited numbers of apprenticeships.

Sinn Féin believe expanding our apprenticeship system is vital to ensure we have the highly skilled and educated workers for growing and emerging industries, and also to give our young people more choice in the tertiary education sector.

Apprenticeships allow people to earn, learn, and gain work experience, all while also working towards an NFQ qualification. The rate of youth unemployment remains far too high at 12% and the National Youth Council of Ireland has said access to apprenticeships could halve youth unemployment.

Sinn Féin has an ambitious plan that aims to increase the apprenticeship population to 60,000 over the first term of government, in addition to expanding the number of apprenticeship courses to 100.

We have consistently highlighted the low level of female participation and inclusion of people with disabilities in apprenticeships as a cause for concern. It is astonishing to think that, in 2018, there were just 319 female apprentices out of a total apprenticeship population of 13,921, representing a dismal 2%. In addition, just 371 people with disabilities are engaged in apprenticeships. This must be addressed.

Persons with disabilities in Ireland are four times less likely to gain employment than their peers without a disability. Sinn Féin would invest €5 million in rolling out the successful Walk Peer programme nationwide, which supports young people to successfully transition into the world of work by taking steps into further education and training and paid employment.

Additionally, we would establish Disability Expert Support Persons on Education and Training Boards whose functions would include acting as key contact and support persons for students with disabilities.

When it comes to Higher Education, students with disabilities may need to be provided with supports to enable them to succeed for example assistive technology. Sinn Féin will increase the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) accessing higher and further education by 20%.

### **SINN FÉIN PRIORITIES INCLUDE:**

- **Increasing the number of apprentices to 60,000**
- **Rolling out the Walk Peer programme**
- **Increasing supports for students with disabilities in further and higher education**

## **ADDRESSING PAY INEQUALITY**

Sinn Féin is committed to the principle of equal pay for equal work and we would establish a single tier pay scale for all teachers faster than the current government have committed. Newly qualified teachers have been penalised by the approach of previous governments.

Schools generally have experienced cuts over recent years even as cost pressures were rising and we believe there is a need to restore greater funding. Over a term of government, Sinn Féin will direct more funding towards better pay, terms and conditions for SNAs and school secretaries. All staff that support the education of our next generation are deserving of dignity, respect, and a good wage.

### **SINN FÉIN PRIORITIES:**

- **Fast-tracking end of two-tier pay structures for teachers**
- **Better pay, terms and conditions for SNAs and school secretaries**

