



IPPN Submission to the Department of Education

**Education for Sustainable Development
Strategy 2030**

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. Established in 1999, IPPN is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education and Skills as an official Education Partner, IPPN works with the Department of Education (DE), the National Parents' Council, management bodies, unions, education agencies, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,000 Principals and Deputy Principals, leading Ireland's 3,200+ primary schools.

IPPN has engaged with a number of Global Citizenship Town Hall meetings and has reviewed the government's publication *Ireland's Education for Sustainable Development Strategy 2030*. We set out below our feedback in relation to those elements of the strategy pertaining to primary education, focusing on key priorities, challenges and concerns.

2 KEY PRIORITIES

Given the importance of education in developing key skills and knowledge to empower individuals and society to build a sustainable future, it is encouraging that there is an emphasis on integration, cohesion and alignment of policies across sectors to achieve the 17 ambitious and very laudable UNESCO strategic development goals.

IPPN has identified three key areas that we believe to be fundamental to achieving the 2030 targets:

1. Integration into and across all curricula - early education to post-primary and beyond
2. Building capacity to scale up what we do – teacher CPD and centralised, simplified, age-referenced teaching resources, capacity for school leaders to embed good practice
3. Research-informed practice, both in relation to formal education and lifelong learning.

IPPN supports the continued focus on **integration** in the strategy across early childhood, primary, post-primary and further education sectors. As identified in the strategy, adequate capacity and CPD will be needed to empower primary teachers and school leaders to effectively embed Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in pupils' learning. It will be important to build on the work already done in the early childhood sector with the Aistear curriculum and the Síolta quality framework, which are excellent foundations upon which to build during the subsequent years of children's education.

Integration across education sectors (early childhood, primary and post-primary) in terms of curriculum is vital – the primary curriculum is already very overloaded, thus simplification and integration are key, as are CPD and easily accessible resources for teachers that are age appropriate. Opportunity to engage with NCCA on their review of the primary curriculum to progress this - great timing as they're consulting on this now!

There is already considerable emphasis in primary education on ESD-related content in the curriculum and in the holistic education of primary pupils. There are opportunities to build on this work, both in further and enhancing the curriculum at primary level and to improving access to resources and training all levels, to increase the integration and embedding of ESD right across the education sector and into communities.

As mentioned in the Strategy, there is a significant number of (optional) programmes, initiatives and strategies already in place in the primary sector relating to ESD, including the Green Schools initiative, the Blue Star programme, the Yellow Flag award, to name just a few. While these are laudable and further the aims of the ESD strategy, they are not part of a coherent framework, they are not embedded within the curriculum and they require significant additional work over and above delivering on the curriculum. They usually require significant documentation to achieve the recognition required of the programmes, which can be onerous. A more sustainable approach would be to embed some of the key aspects of ESD learning into the curriculum, together with the requisite teacher training to ensure it is delivered to a high standard.

Similarly, there is a plethora of resources available across various organisations – 250+ on Scoilnet.ie alone according to the consultation paper. Ideally these would be centralised, and improved to ensure ease of access / searching by teachers and others by theme/topic to age-appropriate materials. Irish-language materials for each theme/topic are also required to facilitate schools and other organisations that communicate ‘tri mheán Gaeilge’. The promotion of available ESD resources/support/CPD could be expanded across PDST and other stakeholder seminar days/workshops/online courses with teachers and schools.

Agreement is needed among all the stakeholders (DE, DFA, NGOs etc.) about what should be included in the curriculum around ESD. Bringing a coherent and agreed approach to the NCCA for consideration would help to progress this.

In relation to **capacity**, IPPN fed back as part of the 2018 mid-point review that the dearth of information about what ESD-related professional development, training and supports are in place needed to be dealt with as a priority, as well as clear actions to fully deliver the 2014-2020 strategy. The Lifeskills Survey, undertaken in primary schools every three years, was to have taken ESD into account in its last iteration – it is not clear whether this has been achieved.

Also acknowledged in the strategy, professional development of teachers - whether during Initial Teacher Education, induction, continuous or lifelong learning stages of a teacher’s career - is essential if the strategy is to be delivered. The provision of ESD training to teachers still seems to be sporadic and ‘patchy’ and is not coordinated centrally e.g. by the Professional Development Service for Teachers or the network of Education Centres - this is an opportunity for the Department of Education

to help deliver a key aspect of the ESD strategy. It is not clear whether the research intended to be carried out by the education centre network in 2015 in relation to ESD professional development was in fact undertaken, which is another opportunity to explore in the coming years.

Further promotion of Student Councils in primary schools would enhance the understanding among teachers and school leaders of children and young people's views on ESD. The advent of the Pupil and Parent Charter will also help strengthen the voice of these key stakeholders in education in relation to sustainable development.

The efforts to consult with children and young people in this and other strategic initiatives such as *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* are laudable and IPPN fully supported this aim. We believe it would be equally beneficial to consult with teachers and school leaders also – particularly in relation to proposed changes to the curriculum and assessment - to ensure that the implementation of the strategy fits with how schools operate in reality. This is particularly important in relation to smaller schools led by 'teaching' principals, which constitute almost 60% of all primary schools, as their opportunities to examine, train, encourage and support other teachers in relation to ESD, or any other strategy or initiative, are severely limited. The strategy strand relating to capacity building for educators provides an opportunity to explore what would work best in this context.

For a number of years, IPPN has worked closely with the Teaching Council, the National Parents' Council, and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals to progress the joint aim of embedding a culture of wellbeing across school communities. This group is collectively known as the Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners group (WTL) and has hosted two national symposia on wellbeing to encourage and support schools who wish to work on this area. There is a clear link between this group's work and the aims of the ESD strategy, which is an opportunity to be explored further by the group progressing the ESD Strategy.

Another key priority is **research**, by which we mean that evidence-based research of what has worked to date is required - to decide what is needed in the coming years and how to reach those who are left behind or haven't engaged with actions around ESD to date. As part of this, it is important to highlight and showcase the impact of good work already done, for example via social media platforms. Clear, concise communication is crucial, using strong graphics and simple messaging. See for example https://www.instagram.com/the_happy_broadcast.

3 CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

At one of the Global Citizenship Town Hall meetings, the biggest challenges to achieving the ESD goals were gathered by participants and presented via menti.com graphic. The two key areas boil down to Funding/Resources and Cohesion/Joined-up thinking/Prioritisation/Alignment.

If the DE is serious about implementing its 2030 strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the related issues of under-**funding** and principals' **workload** must be addressed. IPPN is quite disappointed to note that the strategy again fails to mention leadership in schools as a crucial factor in the successful implementation of ESD by 2030, despite our feedback on this in 2018. The DE has publicly acknowledged on a number of occasions how essential effective school leadership is in effecting system change. Perhaps this oversight can be corrected as part of the review process and its related activities.

Another fundamental issue that needs to be urgently addressed is leadership and management **capacity** in schools, especially to review, implement and embed any system change. This is particularly challenging for the almost 60% of primary school leaders who teach full time in addition to their leadership and management responsibilities. The discrepancies in the funding and resourcing of primary versus post-primary schools are also anomalous and an ongoing cause of concern and frustration.

The sheer volume of initiatives, strategies, programmes and research focusing their attention on schools needs to be acknowledged as an impediment to change. Many teachers are passionate about sustainable development and the various aspects of ESD which they teach, yet they are deeply concerned that adding more content to an already **overloaded curriculum** will result in failure. The only approach that would work is to integrate any new content across the curriculum and provide the resources, training and support to embed it effectively. With the NCCA currently undertaking a review of the primary curriculum and the timetabling of curricular areas, there is a key opportunity to address this and ensure that ESD is not a 'bolt-on' as it has been to date, but integrated seamlessly within the curriculum, and indeed integrated across sectors also.

If the ESD strategy and vision is to be fully delivered, it must be recognised that teachers require significantly more training and ongoing **professional development** in what would be expected of them. Furthermore, all schools must have adequate broadband / ICT infrastructure. As highlighted in numerous reports since the COVID pandemic required schools to provide remote learning, this is still not the case in a significant number of primary schools and must be achieved before any attempt is made to add further curricular content.

Another challenge to be addressed relates to how information about **energy use** in schools is gathered. As publicly-funded organisations, schools report to the SEAI in detail on energy use each year. The issue for schools is that no-one in the school community is trained to do this nor has the time to do such work. Small schools in particular have inadequate administration support. IPPN suggested that a centrally-resourced 'Energy Audit Team' should be set up to do this work, to identify the required improvements to create more sustainable school environments and the State should then fund those improvements, and facilitate the relevant works to be completed. To expect schools themselves to undertake such work takes them away from their core work - which is teaching and learning - and it also sets them up for failure, as they are neither skilled nor resourced to complete the work to a high standard.

A related issue is the matter of sustainable school **buildings**. While there is work underway to retrofit schools to meet energy efficient targets, and new schools are now being built according to the latest standards, the progress is very slow. Schools are effectively left to apply for 'summer works' or 'emergency works' grants or to await minor works grants to undertake works such as re-roofing, upgrading mechanical and electrical infrastructure and improving insulation etc. These grants may or may not be allocated, and when they are allocated, often there is little notice given to allow schools to plan the works during periods of school closure. Again, a more centralised, fully-funded approach would ensure this aspect of the strategy would be implemented well ahead of the 2030 target.

4 IPPN SUPPORT

IPPN would be happy to share key information to members via internal communication channels about supports, resources and CPD that are available to teachers and curriculum leaders in Irish primary schools. To avoid these channels being saturated with information schools can access elsewhere, we would request that all the key information be centralised and communicated occasionally, as we need to ensure that our channels are protected as a one-stop-shop for crucial information for school leaders to support them in their leadership and management role.

It will be no problem to help to raise awareness, occasionally, among own stakeholders of the public consultation process through our social media channels – LinkedIn and Twitter.

We are happy to discuss ways in which IPPN might contribute to achieving the aims of, and the input to and actions for ESD to 2030.