

IPPN Feedback on the implementation of the Free Schoolbooks Scheme

Context

IPPN welcomed the initiative to provide free school books, workbooks and copies for all primary school children and its objective to ensure equality of access to resources. IPPN consistently stated that its priority was to ensure the scheme's successful and effective implementation in all primary schools.

In advance of the guidance being published, IPPN wrote to the DE to express legitimate concerns regarding the manner in which the scheme would operate, the logistical implications for schools and school leaders, in terms of its administration, and the extent to which the scope of the scheme would meet parental expectations.

We know from our recent analysis of the current reality of primary school leadership that leadership capacity and effectiveness have been wholly compromised by the unsustainable workload that arises from having to undertake tasks and responsibilities that have nothing to do with our core purpose of leading teaching and learning. Schools appoint principals and deputies to better ensure the high quality teaching and learning in our schools that lead to better outcomes for children. The reality is that school leaders are consistently diverted from doing the job they signed up to do.

It is in this context that IPPN's first preference would have been for a voucher system to remove the administrative burden from the school. However, if a voucher scheme was not to be embraced, we lobbied for the inclusion in the scheme of an infrastructural support fund that would give schools the flexibility and autonomy to secure additional leadership / administrative capacity to oversee the administration of the scheme. IPPN welcomed the administrative support grant that was detailed in the guidance that issued to schools. It was an acknowledgement of the current unsustainable leadership reality and the need for additional leadership capacity in our schools.

IPPN recognised that this was a valuable opportunity both to share leadership and develop leadership capacity in the school. In that context, we encouraged school Boards of Management and school leaders to use the administration support grant to free up the person in the school who was best placed to administer the scheme (whether that's the Principal the Deputy Principal, a member of the leadership & management team or another staff member). This would serve to enhance leadership capacity within the school while also ensuring a smoother rollout of the scheme.

Feedback from School Leaders on the Implementation of the scheme

- 538 school leaders responded to our survey on the operation of the Free Primary Schoolbooks Scheme
 - 77% of respondents were in schools with fewer than 300 pupils

- 18% of respondents were in schools with between 300 and 600 pupils
- 5% of respondents were in schools with more than 600 pupils
- 90% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the Free Primary Schoolbooks Scheme was of significant benefit to parents in terms of reducing back-to-school costs.
- 41% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the level of funding per student (€96) was sufficient to cover the cost of textbooks, workbooks and copybooks while 50% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case.
- 11% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the level of funding per student (€96) was sufficient to cover the cost of other related classroom resources described in the guidelines, while 82% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case.
- Based on the mid-interval figures in the options choices made available and the number of responses, it was possible to calculate that school leaders believe that €126.72 per pupil would be the figure required to fund the scheme sufficiently.
- 84% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the implementation of the scheme in the school created a significant additional administrative/leadership burden.
- In terms of who took responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the scheme in the school, school leaders reported the following –
 - 22% = Principal
 - 14% = Deputy Principal
 - 10% = An Assistant Principal
 - 4% = A teacher who didn't have a promoted post
 - 3% = A Special Needs Assistant
 - 21.5% = School Secretary
 - 0% = Member of the Board of Management
 - 0.5% = Parent
 - 18% = A combination of the above
 - 7% = Other

- In terms of how the Administration Support Grant was used, 75% of respondents reported using it as a direct payment to the person(s) overseeing the implementation of the scheme while 10% of respondents used it to buy in substitute cover to free up the person(s) overseeing the implementation of the scheme.
- 23% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the extent of the funding made available through the Administration Support Grant was sufficient compensation for the workload involved in implementing the scheme while 64% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case.
- Based on the mid-interval figures in the options choices made available and the number of responses, it was possible to calculate that school leaders believe that €191.85 would be an appropriate daily rate.
- The responses of school leaders filtered by the three categories of size of school indicated that the number of schooldays that were required in their schools to oversee the implementation of the scheme was
 - 5.75 days in schools with fewer than 300 pupils
 - 7.59 days in schools with between 300 and 600 pupils
 - 10.21 days in schools with more than 600 pupils

Audit Process

While IPPN acknowledges the need for transparency and accountability with regard to the expenditure of public money and the need for an audit process, there was considerable dismay among school leaders at the onerous nature of the process with which the school was expected to engage. The detailed nature of the excel spreadsheet that was emailed to the 230 schools selected for audit took little account of the lack of administrative and/or leadership capacity in schools to undertake such an exercise.

It should be noted that financial oversight in relation the expenditure of grants is the responsibility of the schools' Boards of Management. Communication to schools with regards to this process should have been addressed to the Chairperson of the Board of Management and it was each individual Board's responsibility to respond.

In our survey, we asked those schools who were selected for audit to evaluate the workload involved in completing the audit process. 76 of those 230 schools (one in every three) responded. 71% of respondents from those schools described the workload involved as **excessive**, 20% described it as **significant** and only 9% described it as **manageable**.

The recognition of the need for additional administrative/leadership capacity in schools to oversee the effective implementation of the scheme was a welcome development. It is, therefore, regrettable that there was no equivalent recognition of what would be required in terms of administrative/leadership capacity to facilitate engagement with an onerous audit process.

Recommendations

1. Increase the per capita funding per pupil to €127
2. Remove the administrative burden of the implementation of the scheme from schools through the use of a voucher scheme to parents.
3. If a voucher scheme is not used, ensure that sufficient additional leadership/administration capacity is given to schools to implement the scheme effectively.
4. This should be done either through the sanctioning of leadership days to schools or through the provision of an enhanced Administrative Support Fund.
5. If the leadership days option is pursued, they should be sanctioned as follows:
 - a. 6 days to schools with fewer than 300 pupils
 - b. 8 days to schools with between 300 and 600 pupils
 - c. 10 days to schools with more than 600 pupils
6. If the Administration Support Grant option is retained, the daily rate should be increased to €192 and multiplied by the number of days stipulated in recommendation 5 for each school type.
7. Schools who have been selected for the audit process should be given an additional allocation of 2 leadership days or, alternatively, €384 per school to facilitate the freeing up of the person in the school who is best placed to engage with the audit process on behalf of the Board of Management.

Appendix - Summary of freeform responses from school leaders

There was an opportunity for respondents to provide additional comments. 234 school leaders availed of the opportunity to do so, either through the survey or direct email, and the following is a summary of their responses grouped into categories

1. Mixed Reactions to the Scheme:

- While some respondents view the scheme positively, acknowledging its benefits for parents and students, others express disappointment and frustration, emphasising the negative impact on schools.
- There is a range of opinions on whether the scheme is a welcome addition or an additional burden on schools.
- Some respondents express doubt about the necessity of the scheme, suggesting it should have been means-tested and questioning the role of schools in taking on additional parental responsibilities.
- The lack of clear communication regarding the future of the scheme and concerns about its sustainability are common themes.
- Clarity is sought as to whether the grant is an annual commitment or subject to changes, similar to the concerns expressed about disappearing grants in the past.
- DEIS schools express concerns about the reduction in the DEIS grant and the overall impact on their finances.
- Despite administrative challenges, some positive aspects are acknowledged, such as better ensuring that all pupils have the correct books on the first day, potentially impacting teaching and learning positively.

2. Administrative Burden and Workload

- The theme of a significant administrative burden and workload is prominent, with mentions of extensive work involved in obtaining quotes, sorting, labelling, and distributing books.
- The issue of the number of hours'/days' work required to implement the scheme being in excess of what the guidelines estimated is consistently highlighted.

3. Level of funding per student

- Many respondents highlight that the grant would not have been sufficient to cover the cost of textbooks, workbooks and copybooks, were it not for the pre-existing book rental schemes.

- This will limit the possibility of the introduction of new books and schemes in schools which will compromise teaching and learning.

4. Administration Support Grant

- Concerns about the administrative support grant being inadequate compensation for the workload involved are consistently highlighted.
- The further reduction of this payment through the deduction of tax is identified as a deterrent to members of staff becoming involved in overseeing or assisting with the scheme's implementation.

5. Special Schools

- Special schools express the need for a higher grant, emphasising the personalised and more expensive nature of resources for children with complex needs.
- The timeline and structure of the scheme are considered challenging for special schools.

6. The Audit Process

- The audit process is widely criticised for being excessive, time-consuming, and causing stress, especially for small schools and teaching principals. The need for detailed itemisation and retrospective information is particularly challenging.