

IPPN Feedback on the implementation of the Free Schoolbooks Scheme 2024

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 has consistently stated that its priority is to ensure the scheme's successful and effective implementation in all primary schools.

IPPN continues to have legitimate concerns regarding the logistical implications for schools and school leaders, in terms of the scheme's administration.

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.

As you know, IPPN 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 is an acknowledgement of the current unsustainable leadership reality and the need for additional leadership capacity in our schools.

Feedback from School Leaders on the Implementation of the scheme

- 1267 school leaders responded to our survey on the operation of the Free Primary Schoolbooks Scheme
 - 30% of respondents were in schools with fewer than 100 pupils
 - 44% of respondents were in schools with between 101 and 300 pupils
 - 23% of respondents were in schools with between 301 and 600 pupils
 - 03% of respondents were in schools with more than 600 pupils
- 88% 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. This is a slight decrease on last year's figure of 90%.
- 37% of respondents said that the level of funding per student (€80) was sufficient to cover the cost of textbooks, workbooks and copybooks while 63% of respondents said it wasn't. This marked an increase of 13% in the number of school leaders who felt that the scheme was not sufficiently funded to cover the cost of textbooks, workbooks and copybooks.

- 9% of respondents said that the level of funding per student (€80) was sufficient to cover the cost of other related classroom resources described in the guidelines, while 91% of respondents said that it wasn't. This marked an increase of 13% in the number of school leaders who felt that the scheme was not sufficiently funded to cover the cost of other related classroom resources.
- 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 €115.52 per pupil would be the figure required to fund the scheme sufficiently.
- 81% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the implementation of the scheme in the school created a significant additional administrative/leadership burden. This marks a reduction of 3% from the equivalent figure last year.
- The responses of school leaders filtered by the four categories of size of school, as to whether the number of days made available through the Administration Support Grant was sufficient to oversee the implementation of the scheme, are detailed in the following table

School size	Yes	No
Fewer than 100 pupils	49%	51%
Between 101 and 300 pupils	35%	65%
Between 301 and 600 pupils	43%	57%
601 pupils or more	56%	44%

- The responses of school leaders filtered by the three categories of size of school, as to whether the extent of the funding made available through the Administration Support Grant was sufficient compensation for the workload involved, are detailed in the following table

School size	Yes	No
Fewer than 100 pupils	42%	58%
Between 101 and 300 pupils	36%	64%
Between 301 and 600 pupils	35%	65%
601 pupils or more	52%	48%

Recommendations

1. Initiate the rollout of the 2025 scheme earlier than it was done this year – preferably before Easter.
2. Increase the per capita funding per pupil to €116
3. Ensure that sufficient additional leadership/administration capacity is given to schools to implement the scheme effectively. Some progress has been made on this in 2024 but more capacity must be given to schools in 2025 to support the effective implementation of the scheme at school level.

4. This should be done either through the sanctioning of additional leadership days to schools or through the provision of a further enhanced Administrative Support Fund.

Summary of Comments from School Leaders

Respondents to the survey were afforded the opportunity to comment on their experiences of implementing the scheme. The 371 comments received are summarized under the broad headings below.

1. Insufficient Funding and Resources

Many respondents emphasize that the funding allocated was inadequate for the scheme's demands. They describe how schools often had to use additional funds or go without essential resources to cover the costs, particularly for new or updated curriculum materials. Schools had to bargain for lower prices or reuse materials due to financial constraints. This financial shortfall was also exacerbated by unexpected expenses for new students or additional resources.

2. Increased Administrative Burden

Implementing the scheme introduced a significant administrative load, particularly on principals and staff who already manage multiple responsibilities. The coordination involved in ordering, distributing, and managing resources required far more time than anticipated. The workload extended across summer months and included compiling lists, obtaining quotes, and managing distribution.

3. Inadequate Compensation and Taxation Issues

There is widespread concern that compensation for the scheme's administration was not sufficient, especially after taxes, which reduced the value of the compensation significantly. Staff felt discouraged due to the low pay rate relative to the workload.

4. Challenges for DEIS, Junior and Smaller Schools

DEIS schools, junior schools, and small schools faced unique challenges. Respondents from DEIS schools noted that they were already running low-cost rental schemes and had extra demands, such as managing varied ability levels, which required differentiated resources. Smaller schools also struggled with limited staff, leaving principals with more responsibility for implementing the scheme. Students in Infant classes are more likely to use consumable resources which means they must be replaced each year. Special funding consideration for junior classes would help address this need.

5. Equity and Special Resources:

Concerns were raised that students needing additional support, such as those in special schools, special classes or availing of SET support, lack appropriate resources without additional parental contributions, which is inequitable.

6. Communication and Planning Concerns

Many respondents felt that poor communication and planning compounded the challenges. They noted delays in scheme announcements, late deliveries from suppliers, and unclear guidelines on ordering and distribution. The lack of timely communication led to delays, with some schools still awaiting books well into the school year, affecting the scheme's effectiveness and students' access to resources.

7. Centralized or Simplified Procurement and Delivery Process

Schools face logistical challenges, from receiving incomplete orders to managing delivery timelines. A centralised procurement system could streamline this, allowing schools to spend more time on educational priorities.

8. Compensation for Book Loss and Damages

Schools need resources to replace lost or damaged books and to cover the costs of materials for new students enrolling mid-year.

9. Consideration of Long-term Educational Goals:

Some suggest transitioning away from traditional textbooks in favour of resources that support modern teaching methods. These include online resources and interactive materials, aligning with the revised curriculum framework and enhancing learning experiences.