

ASTI SUBMISSION - SCHOOL BUILDING PROGRAMME

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Introduction

Schools are critical elements of national infrastructure. Providing appropriate capacity to enable the second-level school system education system to function effectively and efficiently is critical. The ASTI welcomes this opportunity to contribute the Committee's discussion on what is, in essence, an examination of planning for second-level school accommodation. Such an examination is long overdue. From a review of the data, it would appear that the last such examination was in 1996 by the Comptroller and Auditor General. (1) The Irish state is currently facing two major intertwined challenges – sustained demographic growth and multiple infrastructural deficiencies. The 2018 National Planning Framework provides the roadmap for addressing these challenges. It is, however, short on specifics in relation to education: National Objective 31 commits to *“the provision of childcare facilities and new and refurbished schools on well located sites within or close to existing built-up areas that meet the diverse needs of local populations”*. (ibid: 89) It is therefore timely that the Joint Committee on Education and Skills is now focused on the school building programme. The latter should moreover not be narrowly understood as focusing on new builds but rather should encompass current and future school accommodation.

Drivers of Demand on Education Infrastructure

The 2017 IGEES Report on strategic public infrastructure identified primary and secondary drivers of demands on the education infrastructure. (2) Demographic change is the primary driver: it comprises population growth, the age composition of the population, migration patterns and the geographical dispersion of the population. The Department of Education and Skills forecast that the most likely scenario is that the level of enrolments in 2035 will be 17% higher than in 2017. (3) Secondary drivers at second level include the following and will be subject to significant regional variation:

- Participation and retention rates which will influence demand for further and higher level education
- Technological developments will drive demand for better broadband connectivity and physical infrastructure of schools, including wireless networking, digital learning tools and equipment.
- Special needs provision will impact on physical infrastructure of schools, including the need for on-site therapeutic and related services.
- Changes in the pupil teacher ratio will impact on class sizes and by extension demand for space.
- Existing stock and prefab replacement: the age of existing stock will drive demand for investment.

The ASTI would add to this list as follows:

- Priority of wellbeing and youth mental health which will require schools to have dedicated spaces for counselling and related services.
- National STEM strategy objective to increase the number of students taking STEM subjects will require more and better equipped laboratories.
- Ongoing curriculum change based on active-learning methodologies, collaborative work, enquiry-based learning, etc., will require radical changes to the layout of classrooms and other learning spaces.

Evidence-Based Planning for School Infrastructure

Good public policy requires up-to-date and accurate evidence to inform decision-making. In relation to demographic change, the evidence base is both robust and detailed as is evident in the National Development Plan, 2018-2027. The work of the All-Ireland Research Observatory – AIRO – is of particular significance in this regard. The state knows the likely demographic demand in the medium and long-term and can plan accordingly. It has done so to a significant degree as is evidenced in the fact that in the last five years, 14 new second-level schools have been opened with an aggregate enrolment of 10,000 students. (<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Building-Works/Major-Projects/large-scale-projects-completed-2010-to-date.pdf>)

However, serious questions must be asked in relation to the reliability of the evidence base on the current school infrastructure. The CAAG 1996 report on planning of second-level school accommodation recommended that an ‘inventory of accommodation’ be undertaken to assess both the current stock of accommodation and to plan for future needs. (ibid: 12) This CAAG reiterated this recommendation in its 2004 report on the pilot group of public-private-partnership schools which stated that the lack of information hindered the ability of the Department to manage accommodation provision for both new and existing schools. (4)

Each year, the Department of Education and Skills expends significant amounts of money on upgrading the current school infrastructure. Grants are provided to schools under various headings: additional accommodation; prefab replacement initiative; emergency works; remediation programmes; summer works scheme; minor works grants; fire safety audits. (<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Building-Works/>) It would seem self-evident that in order to manage such expenditure into the future that the Department would seek to develop an up-to-date inventory on the current stock of accommodation in light of the drivers of change outlined above. Such an initiative should not necessarily require significant outlay: the annual statistical returns to the Department could be extended to provide information on infrastructural usage and projected requirements. To alleviate further administrative burden on school principals, the requirement to provide such information could be on a triennial basis.

Need to Upgrade Current School Accommodation

The ASTI believes that one of the most pressing challenges for education policy at present is the need to improve the quality of school accommodation. Year-on-year commissioned research by the ASTI confirms that many schools have significant infrastructural deficits. (5) Teachers and school principals have highlighted over-crowded classrooms; inadequate number of science laboratories; lack of rooms for resource teaching and other forms of personalised learning support; inadequate PE facilities, especially in relation to showering and changing areas; non-existent social and circulating space for students. Stresses on school accommodation have frequently resulted in school libraries assembly hall/social spaces being converted to classrooms. It is of note that the 2016 ESRI report on broadband in schools concluded that while the deployment of high-quality broadband connectivity has eliminated one of the biggest barriers constraining ICT integration in schools, other infrastructural deficits remain. These include school organisational issues, including the requirement for teachers to move between classrooms, classroom design issues and availability of ICT hardware in classrooms. (6)

Effective Learning Environments

Architecture exerts a profound influence on the quality of all our lives in all of its contexts – at home, at work, in the community. Schools are not an exception as regards the influence of the built environment on the quality of students and teachers' lives. The physical learning environment is an influential element in the complex and highly contextualised nature of learning. Insufficient attention has been given to this dimension of investment in education. The OECD has just recently initiated an innovative project on the physical learning environment called the Learning Environments Evaluation Programme – LEEP. (7) The project aims to produce instruments and analyses to assist policy makers about how investments in learning environments, including educational spaces and technologies, translate into improved learning, health and social outcomes for young people. Ireland's participation in this project represents a unique opportunity for building up an empirical data base on our current school accommodation. The project will gather data via questionnaires for school management, teachers and students on the effectiveness, efficiency and sufficiency of the physical learning environment. The ASTI strongly recommends that the Department of Education and Skills continue to participate in this highly relevant OECD project.

Funding Models for Schools are Problematic

2018 is a symbolic year in Irish second-level education as it marks the 50th anniversary of the commencement of free second-level education. This watershed development initiated a period of profound changes in Irish education and the wider society which continue to be influential today. An important area of change was that of the governance and funding of second-level schools. The 2013 ESRI report– *Governance and Funding of Secondary Schools in Ireland* – is the first systematic analysis of the variation in funding and governance across sectors. (8) While noting the difficulties in making comparisons across sectors due to the different funding models, it found that voluntary secondary schools "receive a significantly

lower proportion of funding from the state and, as a result, are more reliant on voluntary contributions from parents and general fund-raising” (ibid: 146) While the other sectors had more adequate funding mechanisms, they also had to resort to funding from non-State sources to meet running costs. (ibid: 154)

The ESRI Report repeatedly referred both to the lack of transparency in funding structures for the day-to-day management of schools and also to the variation in the extent to which various aspects of school governance across the sectors are financed by the State. It concluded that a sustainable model of school funding must be created to meet demographic demand and which is based on student need rather than on sector type. (ibid p.157) A large number of voluntary secondary schools are in older buildings which invariably impacts on costs of maintenance, versatility of accommodation, capacity for expansion, etc. Capital costs, maintenance and heating are also driven by the age and condition of school buildings. There is no doubt that there is substantial variation in the stock and stock and condition of school buildings between the sectors. Once again, the ASTI recommends that an inventory of school accommodation be established by the Department of Education and Skills to provide the evidence base for the overall school building programme.

Conclusion

The quality of school accommodation is an often over-looked aspect of education policy. The school building programme is primarily focused on ensuring that sufficient new spaces are available to respond to demographic demand. This programme should also encompass current school accommodation to ensure that the latter is adequate to meet the curriculum, digital learning and social needs of students and teachers.

REFERENCES

1. Comptroller and Auditor General 1996, *Planning of Second-Level Accommodation*, Report on Value for Money, Department of Education
2. Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, 2017, *Strategic Public Infrastructure: Capacity and Demand Analysis*, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
3. DES (2017) Projections of Full Time Enrolment Primary and Second Level, 2017-2035 <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/Projections-full-time-enrolment-Primary-and-Second-Level-2017-2035.pdf>
4. Comptroller and Auditor General 2004, *The Grouped Schools Private Partnership Process*, Report on Value for Money, Department of Education and Science

5. Since 2012, ASTI has commissioned RED C consultancy to conduct research on schools, including impact of austerity budgets on school services; trends in teacher workload; impact of curriculum change; newly qualified teachers; student wellbeing. See <https://www.asti.ie/publications/other/>

6. ESRI, 2016 *Teaching and Learning in Second-Level Schools at the Advent of High-Speed Broadband*, Research Series 51, ESRI

7. OECD, 2017 *Learning Environments Evaluation Programme – LEEP*, OECD Paris
<http://www.oecd.org/education/effective-learning-environments/>

8. ESRI, 2013– *Governance and Funding of Voluntary Secondary Schools in Ireland*, Research Series 34, ESRI