

#RightToBeAReader

This year, let's restore the school library fund in Budget 2022



‘A childhood without books – that would be no childhood. That would be like being shut out from the enchanted place where you can go and find the rarest kind of joy.’

– Astrid Lindgren, author of *Pippi Longstocking*

It’s time to reverse the cut

Books act as mirrors and windows, reflecting a child’s own reality as well as giving them an insight into the lives of others whose culture and point of view may be different from their own. Reading has the power to change children’s lives for the better. That is why the Budget previously included grant funding for primary schools to keep their libraries stocked.

However this grant was cut in 2008 and has never been restored. That was almost fifteen years ago.

As a result fewer children have ready access to excellent, modern books. Many schools have had to rely on donations to provide an essential resource. New schools are being built with a library space provided but no funding to fill it.

This year we can change this – by restoring the fund in Budget 2022.

Why reading matters

Evidence shows that reading for pleasure is more important for children’s cognitive development than their parents’ level of education, and is a more powerful factor in life achievement than socio-economic background.

Reading has also been linked with improved mental wellbeing, which is crucial as society recovers from the impacts of the pandemic.

The OECD has said ‘all the students who are highly engaged in reading achieve reading literacy scores that are significantly above the international mean, whatever their family background’.

The Government-funded *Growing Up in Ireland* report from the ESRI and Trinity College Dublin found that ‘among older children, self-directed reading and taking part in structured cultural activities outside school time contribute to cognitive development (in terms of both verbal and numeric skills) as well as to academic self-confidence’.

All the research confirms: reading matters.

All children deserve books – but not all can access them

We recognise that students experiencing disadvantage have been worst impacted by the pandemic. But the divide in reading is not just socio-economic: having access to books to spark a child's imagination and help them to reach their full potential is the right of *every* child. All schools require a wide range of texts in order to deliver on the aims of the primary language curriculum, which calls for 'a consistent engagement with a rich selection of the best literature appropriate to his/her stage of development'.

In 2020, Children's Books Ireland had almost 400 applications for our school library donation project. 70% of these came from non-DEIS schools. Research shows a marked gender difference in reading for pleasure. According to the Growing Up In Ireland study 'the scale of the gender difference found in the study is remarkable. Among nine- and 13-year-olds, girls from working-class background are as likely as, or even more likely than, middle-class boys to read every day'.

The same study shows a marked gender difference in nine-year-olds, with more girls saying they 'always like' reading than boys (68% compared with 55%). Children with special educational needs also read less often than other children, migrant students have lower scores on English reading than Irish peers, and evidence shows that more than 60% of Traveller pupils are below the 20th percentile in English reading.

A universal grant would encourage all readers to find the right book for them.

Public libraries are wonderful – but not the solution

Public libraries are an incredible resource but the services provided by public libraries to schools vary hugely according to each local authority's individual capacity and resources. Not all schools can visit a public library: transport can pose an issue, particularly in rural communities. Mobile libraries visit some, but not all, schools, and not as frequently as is needed to encourage a thriving culture of reading. And not all families visit the library: many parents and carers may see these spaces as 'not for them'.

Funding school libraries allows *every* child to become a reader.

'Overall, children and young people who used the school library had better levels of reading enjoyment, reading for pleasure, reading confidence, writing for pleasure, writing confidence, and reading attainment than those who did not.'

– 2019 Annual Literacy Survey, National Literacy Trust (UK)

Finally, a little would go a long way

Allocating €10 for every primary school child in the country to help schools buy books for their libraries – including audio and picturebooks – means a Budget 2022 allocation of only €5.68m. This modest investment can open up a lifetime of possibility and excitement for children.

What can I do?

- **Contact your local TD to ask for their support in advance of the Budget in October.**
- **You can do this by email, on social media, by contacting their constituency office, or by writing a letter.**
- **There are lots of ways to make your voice heard – and every voice matters.**



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