

**TEXTBOOK GRANTS AND BOOK RENTAL SCHEMES**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Draft Guidelines and Report for Consultation**

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI) Observations - June 2012**

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**General Observations**

A concerted focus on textbook rental schemes, by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and other partners in education, and how these might be further developed and managed in schools is welcome. This policy move is particularly relevant given the financial difficulties now faced by many families and the need for government funds to be fairly and justly targeted and deployed.

TUI notes that teachers and principals are key players in this area and without their commitment and expertise rental schemes are unlikely to be developed, well maintained and supported in schools. Therefore, it is of considerable disappointment and concern that the DES did not consult with the teacher unions in preparing the draft consultation material. Notwithstanding the legitimacy and usefulness of some of the ideas presented for consultation the involvement of TUI, and the other teacher unions, as representative bodies would have ensured that the views and wide ranging expertise of teachers and principals were more adequately comprehended. This would have brought additional depth and clarity to the documents circulated for comment.

The DES data reflects particular experience and commitment to developing rental schemes in VEC and Community & Comprehensive schools. Therefore, TUI which represents teachers and principal teachers in these schools and whose members have considerable experience in this area, respectfully requests that it be invited to participate in any further working group considering the future development of such schemes.

As part of other public consultations TUI has frequently and consistently highlighted the importance of all students having adequate access to the basic, essential tools to learn. In this regard, it is extremely disappointed that the Minister has not committed to even a marginal increase in the overall fund available for book grants and rental schemes. Unfortunately many schools have reported (Internal TUI Survey, 2012) reduced capacity to deploy additional funding (school funds, voluntary contributions, fund raising) to this area, further diminishing benefit and supports to students. Taken in the context of the significantly increased number of families in financial difficulty this represents a deterioration in the value of book rental schemes vis-a-via the number of students that now merit assistance.

TUI draws special attention to the fact that in the past rental schemes have worked well in many post-primary schools because they have been in a position to invest a good level of staff and co-ordinating time in supporting such schemes. The consultation material reflects the significant commitment required of all the players. This is welcome and important as TUI members emphasise that ‘developing, sustaining administering and co-ordinating a book rental scheme’ has significant workload implications for schools and teachers. Given the reduction in teacher numbers and especially the reduction in middle management posts of responsibility, capacity in schools to maintain, not least expand, rental schemes has been significantly undermined. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

**Allocation of the DES Textbook Grant**

***Access and Distribution***

Following the government decision (2008) to reduce book grant funds TUI was among the many organisations that highlighted the unjust and harsh nature of this decision. It therefore welcomed the amelioration of the decision but did not support the general funding model that emerged. It sees this approach as ‘adding advantage’ to some families that already enjoy advantage because of their economic background. It also provides advantage to some schools, especially those serving communities that have access to a significant level of social, cultural and economic capital. However, TUI accepts that the number of families experiencing financial difficulty has increased significantly and that their geographical distribution has widened, particularly so in large urban areas.

With reference to the ideas and options set out in the DES consultation report TUI notes the following:

1. All schools should have access to a book grant. This acknowledges that most schools serve a number of families whose economic circumstances merit additional support to furnish the basic tools of learning to children and young people.
2. DEIS schools should continue to receive an enhanced per capita grant for all students. This approach recognises individual need and the overall infrastructural, social and cultural deficits that prevail in the communities in which they are located and the lack of access to additional voluntary contributions and private sponsorship.
3. Non- DEIS schools should not automatically receive a per capita grant for all students irrespective of socio-economic background or family circumstances. TUI believes this approach provides additional advantage to some families and schools that already enjoy advantage. It also means that available funding is spread too thinly, diminishing the level of funding available to support the students, families and communities most in need. Therefore, while all schools should have access to DES book grants, funding should not attach to all students.
4. TUI disagrees with the notion that a system of differentiated access to the DES book grant fund by Non-DEIS schools, based on the socio-economic profile of students, is too complex and burdensome to administer locally or nationally. Neither does it support the view that it will engender insensitivity or compromise individual students or families. Schools already have considerable experience of handling sensitive issues with respect to family circumstances. In addition, they have ready access to data about families and students which could support a more targeted approach of the fund. This would promote a more just approach to the use of scarce resources intended to support those families and communities in most need. The important thing is that the criteria are fair and allow for reasonable discretion in interpreting the number of students and families that should benefit from additional financial support.

***Book Rental Schemes***

1. In ideal conditions, TUI advocates book rental schemes. Its members have considerable experience of this approach. Many report that it leads to significant savings for families and enables subject teachers to build appropriate stock of books for each subject over time e.g. reasonable variety, access to class sets as well as individual student copies.
2. Notwithstanding a commitment in principle to rental schemes, TUI emphasise that the co-ordination and administration of effective schemes is time consuming and demanding. It is, therefore, disappointed that the Minister and DES appear unwilling to make specific provisions that would enable schools allocate the necessary time and staff to the associated work. In particular, TUI notes that some schools have reported they have withdrawn or reduced co-ordination support for rental schemes as the number of middle management posts have decreased (significantly in many schools) as a consequence of the moratorium on recruitment. Principal teachers believe successful schemes may disintegrate and schools may be forced to adapt the approach of allocating individual financial subvention to students; an approach many report is much less economically efficient or effective.
3. In the current context, therefore, TUI has reservations about incentivising schools that operate rental schemes. However, it believes that the approach set out above under **Access and Distribution (point 3)** is important in this regard. If all schools are not automatically allocated a grant based on a per capita grant for all students, savings could be redirected to provide an enhanced per capita rate or a weighted allocation of 15% - 20% to schools operating a rental scheme. In addition, in recognition of the staff time involved and the decimation of the middle management structures in schools the DES could consider allocating a block of teaching hours to schools operating rental schemes; these hours to be used at the discretion of school management to support the co-ordination and administration of the scheme.
4. Notwithstanding reservations about incentivising rental schemes at this time, TUI highlights a strong social justice contradiction in the current DES thinking and approach. E.g. providing a per capita grant to school for all students irrespective of family or community background is somewhat at variance with a reluctance to make provision for enhanced support to schools operating a book rental scheme, given the prevalence of such schemes in schools serving very disadvantaged or mixed communities. Furthermore, if the available fund was more justly distributed then incentivising rental schemes, based on experience, could lead to long-term efficiencies.

**Guidelines for Developing Textbook Rental Schemes Document**

* TUI advocates the establishment of rental schemes and believes a general set of guidelines will be useful to schools. However, it considers the current draft guidelines require considerable more work. A higher level of attention to administrative and co-ordination issues and approaches (e.g. organising budgets, recording and coding systems, data bases) is necessary if they are to be a truly useful resource.
* The forward indicates the draft guidelines were developed with the help of a number of organisations and schools. As pointed out earlier TUI is very disappointed that it, as a representative body of schools that have very significant experience in managing and organising book rental schemes, was not invited to participate in the discussion in advance of draft guidelines being issued.

***Commitment from and Relationship with Publishers***

* A commitment by publishers to maintain ‘new editions of textbooks’ in print for a minimum number of years would be welcome. The approach and suggested timeframe of six years may however be inadequate, as publishers could feel justified in publishing revised editions before or after this period, even when there has been no significant change to a syllabus. TUI advocates the following commitments from publishers:
* New editions of textbooks will only be published every six to eight years unless very significant changes to a syllabus and/or associated content have emerged. In addition, when new editions become available the previous edition should continue to be published for at least a further two years.
* Where limited syllabus change has taken place or there is a need to update specific information in a textbook, discrete inserts or web postings could be published instead of new editions of the book.
* In cases where support teaching materials (e.g. a CD, software) are produced for a syllabus this should not justify a new edition of a textbook. (Teachers have reported that, in some instances, additional support material and resources have been produced to match a new edition of a textbook and may only be available by buying the new edition; such practice they believe is unnecessary and unfair).

* The draft guidelines suggest that publishers have given a commitment to co-operate with schools in developing book rental schemes. TUI considers this approach may have potential. However, such an approach should be underpinned by protocols that would ensure ethical practise and allow the school or a number of schools to drive the initiative in conjunction with publishers.

***Underlying Principles***

* Broadly, TUI subscribes to some of points set out on page 8 of the draft guidelines document. However, it would not necessarily see all these as principles and has reservations with regard to some of the points.
* The second point refers to fundraising and the sixth point refers to a rental scheme co-ordinator. TUI accepts that some schools have access to funds through voluntary contributions or fundraising activity. It welcomes the acknowledgement that a rental scheme needs to be managed and co-ordinated. However, while boards of management and parents may be able to support some aspects of the work involved (e.g. agree a policy, undertake fundraising, assisting with collection and distribution), core co-ordination must be the responsibility of a teacher. In this regard, TUI reiterates that the middle management structure in schools has been decimated, undermining capacity to maintain or further develop book rental schemes. In the context of scarce personnel and competing issues rental schemes have slipped down the list of priorities in many schools. TUI believes that the future funding and support mechanisms must make provision for management and co-ordination activity.
* The point about students keeping books in good condition is laudable and desirable but it would be impossible to police – the word ‘required’ could be replaced with ‘expected’? A ‘holding deposit’ approach is advised to provide incentive to students and parents to co-operate with this condition and to return the books in good condition. Care must be taken to apply this approach ‘sensitively’ in order not to unduly cause distress to some students whose family circumstances may be particularly difficult.
* The final point about the payment of book rental costs not coinciding with other back-to-school expenses is unclear and required clarification. In this regard, consideration could be given to making provision that a portion of the back-to-school allowance (to which some families are entitled) be paid in book vouchers to be redeemed by schools and/or issuing an element of the back-to-school allowance in September to coincide with the commencement of the school year.

***Other Observations***

* Some headings e.g. ‘A step-by-step approach’ and ‘Budget for Scheme’ are not fully reflective of the points that follow or how these are presented. Some revision is advised.
* TUI notes that teachers are not mentioned under *‘Generating a shared commitment to the book rental scheme’.*  This is disappointing as they are central to whole-school buy-in and, consequently, a comprehensive and successful scheme. A further iteration of the guidelines document should address this.
* The reference to scheme administration is important. Many (e.g. parents, ancillary staff, teachers) could be involved in supporting a scheme. However, TUI believes a teacher, appointed as co-ordinator should have overall responsibility for the management and co-ordination of the scheme. This acknowledges the important but demanding and onerous nature of the work involved, as reflected in the suite of tasks and approaches set out in the draft document.
* The ideas and tips on how to re-use or recycle certain materials and workbooks is helpful. TUI notes that some of these will not be feasible unless a school has access to other resources to build up general facilities in the school and in each classroom e.g. photocopier with high specification, efficient school-wide broadband access.
* The reference to using local providers as suppliers is welcome. Given the current economic situation this is especially important to local communities and could be also significant in building good will and gaining local support.
* The reference to digital media is helpful and appropriate, as some schools will need to consider using at least some of the available resources in this area.

**In summary**:

* TUI welcomes the policy initiative to examine the manner in which the DES fund for textbook grants to schools is allocated.
* TUI supports the idea that all schools should have access to the DES fund. It believes DEIS schools should continue to receive an enhanced per capita grant for all students. However, while all Non-DEIS schools (excluding fee paying schools) should have access to the fund, funding should not attach to all students.
* It welcomes the initiative to promote book rental schemes and emphasises that strong co-ordination and administration support is important to ensure that effective and efficient schemes are developed and maintained.
* In the current context TUI has reservations about incentivising schools that operate rental schemes. Nonetheless, it considers that provision for an enhanced per capita rate per student or a weighted allocation and/or a block of teaching hours to schools operating rental schemes could be explored and viable.
* It is extremely disappointed that the Minister has indicated he will not increase budget provision in this very important area, especially given the growing number of families that need support with the cost of textbooks.
* Finally, it notes disappointment that TUI was not invited to provide observations on this matter at an earlier stage and advocates that it be included more centrally in further discussion and development.

***For further clarification please contact:***

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