

The Joy of Reading: Books and Wellbeing

A Call for Government
to Support School
Communities to Develop
and Sustain Cultures of
Reading for Joy

#ReadingRevolution





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Children's Books Ireland is the national charity and arts organisation that champions every child's right to develop a love of reading. Our mission is to inspire a love of reading in children and young people in Ireland, to share our expertise and enthusiasm with the adults who guide and influence them, to champion every child's right to excellent books and live literature events and support the artists who make that goal possible across the island of Ireland.

Continue the conversation with us at www.childrensbooksireland.ie

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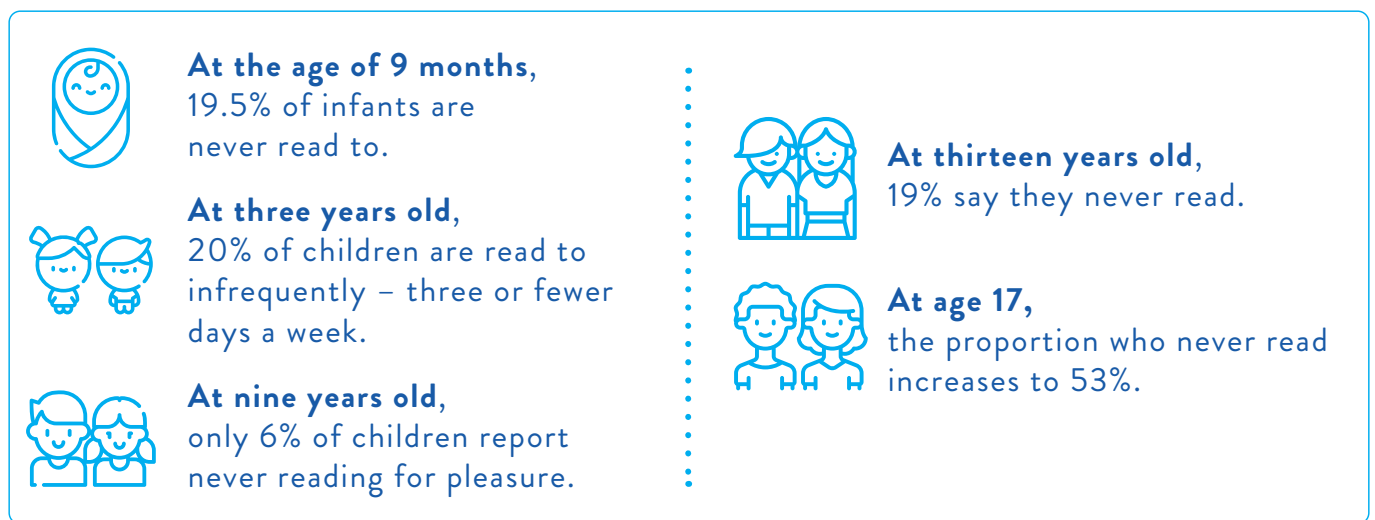
Is é **Leabhair Pháistí Éireann** an carthanas agus eagraíocht ealaíon náisiúnta a thacaíonn leis an gceart atá ag gach páiste grá a chothú don léitheoireacht. Tríd an iliomad gníomhaíochtaí agus imeachtaí, tá sé d'aidhm againn suim i leabhair a spreagadh i bpáistí, tuiscint níos fearr a chothú ar a thábhachtaí is atá leabhair do dhaoine óga agus feidhmiú mar acmhainn thábhachtach do dhaoine a bhfuil suim acu i leabhair do pháistí in Éirinn. Is é an misean atá againn grá don léitheoireacht a spreagadh i bpáistí agus daoine óga in Éirinn, ár gcuid saineolais agus díograise a roinnt leis na daoine fásta a bhíonn á dteorú agus ag dul i gcion orthu, tacú leis an gceart atá ag gach páiste ar leabhair den scoth agus ar imeachtaí litríochta beo, agus tacú freisin leis na healaíontóirí ar fud oileán na hÉireann a fhágann gurbh fhéidir an sprioc sin a bhaint amach.

Bí ag comhrá linn ag childrensbooksireland.ie áit a bhfaighidh tú tuilleadh léirmheasanna, ailt agus an nuacht is déanaí.



Introduction

Children's Books Ireland strives for a future where school communities on the island of Ireland are equipped with the resources and infrastructure they need to create libraries that are representative of the children and young people in their classrooms. These young readers will gain so much enjoyment and inspiration from books that celebrate their lived experiences and offer them chances to explore the world. The right to develop a love of books and reading that will last for a lifetime is a fundamental prerequisite for educational attainment and imaginative development. However, data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* longitudinal study shows that, statistically, reading for pleasure follows a bell curve, dropping steeply between the ages of 9 and 13 and continuing to fall:



If we are to keep children reading and offer them an alternative to screens which is viable, attractive and easily accessible, we must cater to their needs and interests and offer them a regularly refreshed supply of excellent, contemporary books. Without sustainable funding for school libraries, teachers cannot effectively nurture children's reading.

Books are not a luxury when it comes to the emotional and imaginative wellbeing of children and young people – books are essential. If children and young people are supported to read for joy, in school and at home, they are more likely to enjoy school and excel in their learning, they are more likely to develop their capacity for empathy and social engagement, and they are more likely to experience a sense of belonging. Further data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* longitudinal study has demonstrated a link between reading frequently and positive attitudes towards school, across all backgrounds.

‘Those who read for fun more often have higher levels of achievement in reading and maths, are happier, more self-confident as learners and have fewer socio-emotional difficulties.’

Smyth, E., Arts and Cultural Participation among Children and Young People: Insights from the *Growing Up in Ireland* Study.

Context

The Reality in Irish Schools

Access to books for children and young people is mediated through the adults in their lives. This means that, for various reasons, including adult literacy and socioeconomic factors, some children will not have a culture of reading at home, and will *only* be able to access books in their school. A wide variety of excellent books needs to be available in their school library and on their classroom shelves, so they can experience the positive effect reading for joy can have on wellbeing and on educational attainment. But most schools in Ireland do not have a dedicated school library, much less a library run by a qualified school librarian; out of 730 post-primary schools, the Department of Education funds libraries in just 30, under the JCSP programme. Data from our 2024 Book-gifting applications (see below for more details) shows that out of 657 primary schools that applied for support, only 21% had a dedicated library space on their campus, with the majority (53.5%) relying on small amounts of classroom books to cater for their pupils' reading needs. The remaining schools cited small shelf spaces in corridors (which makes browsing and discussion difficult) and mixed use spaces such as classrooms and computer rooms which makes whole-school access problematic. 3.5% said they had no library space at all.

Every student on the island of Ireland deserves to read books that reflect their own reality and mirror the diversity of Irish society. Primary and secondary schools need libraries that offer representative and inclusive books that both reflect the nature of childhood and young adulthood in Ireland today, and support pupils to engage with a multiplicity of experiences, through reading for joy. However, schools are facing the following obstacles when it comes to creating and sustaining cultures of reading for joy (and this list is far from comprehensive):

- Lack of funding, resourcing, and infrastructure for the provision of school libraries in primary and post-primary settings, including training for school librarians and book stock
- Shortages of qualified school librarians, with the exception of 30 JCSP libraries in secondary schools around the country, and a lack of funding to employ them
- Lack of specific expertise, staff time and resources in schools when it comes to choosing new children's and young adult books and using them in the classroom
- Teacher/SNA shortage
- Distance from local public libraries and lack of mobile library service provision in some communities
- Economic disadvantage in school communities

According to the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) 2021, from the Education Research Centre in DCU, the achievement gap in reading and literacy attainment between DEIS and non-DEIS schools hasn't widened between 2014 and 2021. But it hasn't narrowed either. Pupils' socioeconomic status still affects their reading lives. The 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reveals that over two-fifths of pupils aged between 9 and 10 in Ireland (43%), in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools, spent less than half an hour a day reading outside of school, with only 19% spending at least an hour doing so (ERC, 2023). The frequency of reading for fun or joy declined between 2016 and 2021, and pupils became less enthusiastic overall in their attitudes to reading.

Each year, Children's Books Ireland invites primary and secondary schools on the island of Ireland to apply for support in relation to their school libraries and reading cultures. Successful schools receive supports in the form of books, author and illustrator visits, classroom resources, and expert advice on reading promotion, school library management and book procurement. Out of 100 secondary school applications in 2024, 75 were Republic of Ireland schools, 25 were Northern Ireland schools. Of those 75 ROI applications, 23% were DEIS Band 1, while 59.7% were non-DEIS. This clearly illustrates that resourcing issues for school libraries are not confined to DEIS schools but are a nationwide problem. All schools, primary and post-primary, DEIS and non-DEIS need sustained funding streams to develop, stock, and manage their libraries, and to create safe, inspiring and imaginative spaces for their pupils to begin their reading lives.

We received 657 primary school applications in 2024. Of these, 64% of ROI primary schools were non-DEIS. 38% cater for students with support needs, while 62% are supporting refugees. The responses in relation to books on shelves in these primary schools are particularly stark. 62% of schools had less than 500 books on the school campus and 58% stated that their book stock included texts that were over 15 years old. For primary schools, 81% relied on donations from parents and guardians, 63% on donations from school staff, to make their class and school libraries viable. Over half of the schools who applied told us that they relied on volunteerism from teachers, school staff, and parents and guardians to manage their library. **92% of applying schools stated that they had no current funding for school library books.**

The reality of these statistics is that teachers in every school in Ireland are tasked with encouraging children to read using old, tattered, unattractive books which do not reflect the diversity of the students in their classrooms. Teachers cannot buy dyslexia-friendly books to help students who have difficulties with reading to feel included. They cannot explore difficult topics through contemporary books which can help children to empathise and explore emotions safely. They cannot provide high quality children's literature by Irish authors and illustrators, leaving children to read donated copies of bestsellers from the UK and the USA. This leads to striking homogeneity in what Irish children are reading, juxtaposed with the remarkable success and renown of our authors for adults.

What's Working Right Now:

The JCSP Demonstration Library Project, a pilot school library project within the wider Junior Certificate School Programme (which currently stands at 220 secondary schools) has now been running for 20 years, with a total of 30 secondary schools participating, each with a dedicated library space, qualified school librarian, and annual funding for stock procurement. There is currently no firm funding commitment to carry the project past 2024, or indeed, to expand it, with no political party prioritising a movement from pilot status to mainstream provision. The project demonstrably works, and should be expanded, prioritising DEIS secondary schools initially. Such an expansion was announced in the 2005 DEIS Action Plan but never implemented. An equivalent programme that meets the needs of primary schools must also be designed and rolled out across the country.

In Budget 2022, a €20M library book grant was paid to every school in the State, with a general breakdown of €21 allocated per pupil. Both primary and secondary schools struggled to spend the grant – not because there wasn't a significant level of need, but for multiple other reasons, including lack of capacity, due to staffing shortages; lack of knowledge and experience in choosing appropriately engaging and diverse titles, and the administrative infrastructure required in relation to procurement. Teacher shortage is affecting the vast majority of schools in the country, in part due to the dual housing and cost of living crises. This is why school communities need support infrastructure and simple, useful guidance when it comes to creating, stocking and managing school libraries. School communities must also be encouraged and supported to engage with their local libraries and build meaningful, productive relationships with public librarians, creating opportunities for knowledge exchange. School libraries should be at the heart of reading culture in our school communities – the larger and more representative the library, the more opportunities pupils will have to access the joys and benefits of reading.



Recommendations: We need a #ReadingRevolution

What Needs to Be Done

In May 2024, during the inaugural Summit on Child Poverty and Wellbeing, Taoiseach Simon Harris categorically stated that,

‘Ending child poverty is a defining challenge for any leader. I want to lead a country where every child can dream and feel excited about their future, where every child has what they need to be happy and healthy, and where everyone is able to support the children in their lives to feel loved, included, and capable.’

Reading is a hugely effective tool for tackling child poverty, a powerful catalyst for social change, and we are simply not investing enough in the creative and imaginative lives of our school communities to drive and actualise that change. Properly provisioned school libraries are a high-level intervention that would positively affect the lives of every school-going child in the country, from their wellbeing to their academic engagement and would combat social and educational disadvantage. It follows then, that in every school around the country, both primary and secondary, pupils should have access to high quality, contemporary books that:

- Are inclusive, representative, and reflective of the changing cultural and social diversity of Irish classrooms and communities, allowing every child and young person to see themselves in a book and to empathise with lived experiences that are different to theirs, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, socioeconomic background or family circumstances.
- Offer a range of different reading experiences not restricted to traditional prose, including picturebooks, graphic novels, poetry and informative and engaging non-fiction. This is crucial given that the current Primary Curriculum Framework, the current Junior Cycle Framework, and the Senior Cycle English Syllabus all explicitly state that students must be supported to engage with, enjoy, and create a range of different kinds of texts.
- Cater for and support the diverse levels and needs of every pupil, including those with learning difficulties, those who are neurodivergent, and those for whom English is an additional language – the 2014 NAMER report identifies only 1% of print books across all libraries in Irish schools attended by second class students as being in a language other than English or Irish.
- Represent opportunities for pupils to enrich their reading lives by exercising their creative and imaginative autonomy, and to pursue their interests and develop their reading tastes. According to the *Growing Up in Ireland* longitudinal study, 43% of Irish families with children under 3 have fewer than 30 children’s books in their homes, with that figure rising to 66% of immigrant families. As of 2023, only 15% of the population are library members.

All primary and secondary schools should house a rich, vibrant library on the school premises, stocked with contemporary, representative, and inclusive texts, enabling schools to nurture cultures of reading for joy, while being financially and infrastructurally supported to manage and sustain these libraries.



Children's Books Ireland is also striving for a greater awareness within the education system and within government policy, of the positive impact of reading for joy on children and young people, on their emotional and creative development, and on their wellbeing, where this cohort of citizens are recognised as key interpreters of the texts that inform and shape their culture. One of the key success indicators from the Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024–2033 is that pupils will be spending more time reading and writing for enjoyment in primary and secondary schools. Educators across all settings need to be supported to make that success criterion a reality, with access to relevant professional development, practical classroom resources, and well-stocked school libraries.

With this in mind, Children's Books Ireland is calling for a permanent School Library Funding Stream of €63M annually, which would initially allocate funds to purchase 5 books per pupil in 2025 (€65.50 per pupil across a primary and secondary school-going population of approx. 993,542 in 2023, with the average price of a book sitting at €13 according to Nielsen), increasing to 10 books per pupil per year by 2030, with an eventual approximate cost of 131M. This reflects the fact that the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) recommends a minimum of 10–13 books per pupil in order for a school library to be impactful and representative and to allow staff to plan for weeding of older books and general stock turnover. (Smaller schools need an even higher number of books per pupil, i.e. a baseline number of items; a school with fewer than 100 pupils should aim to have a minimum of 1,300 books in its library). Put simply, funding from government for school libraries needs to be annualised and made sustainable, starting with book provision, so that every school-going child and young person in Ireland has access to inclusive and representative books, and continuing with guidance and support for educators.

In addition to a permanent and sustainable funding stream for books in schools, Children's Books Ireland is calling on all political parties to commit to the following:

- Recognise and enshrine the value of reading for joy in educational policy and commit to supporting school communities to develop and sustain creative cultures of reading for joy for their pupils.
- Support teachers and educators to engage confidently with children's and young people's literature and culture, specifically in bringing new, inclusive, and diverse books into their classrooms to inform the educational and reading experiences of their pupils. This must be achieved through the provision of relevant and specifically designed continuous professional development opportunities. Children's and young people's literature and culture should also be prioritised in initial teacher education across all Higher Education Institutions.
- Focus on training and recruiting Literacy and Reading Coordinators in primary and secondary schools.
- Establish a National Advisory Group on School Library Provision as called for by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in 2022, and commit to addressing a key aim of the Committee's report, namely that every primary and secondary school would have a School Library and a School Librarian by 2024.
- Expand the JCSP School Library Demonstration Project and the JCSP Digital Library Service as an urgent national priority, again as called for by the Education Committee's 2022 report.



Conclusion

What change looks like

In order for teachers to inspire their pupils to be readers for life, not simply readers for the system, opportunities need to be seized to create reading communities in our schools where peer to peer engagement and enjoyment is placed front and centre, precisely because,

‘... children’s pleasure in reading is strongly influenced by reading networks and relationships: between teachers; between teachers and children; between children and children; and in some cases, between children, teachers, families and communities.’

Teresa Cremin, ‘Reading communities: why, what and how?’

If we can provide schools with the sustainable funding they need for the procurement of books for school libraries, as well as the necessary administrative supports and professional development opportunities educators deserve, we can transform the reading lives of Irish children and young people. Children’s Books Ireland can provide educational and creative resources that support schools to create and sustain cultures of reading and that inspire and upskill teachers to bring books to life in their classrooms – but without dedicated investment in a permanent funding stream, educators will struggle to provide their pupils with books that reflect and celebrate their lives, broaden their perspectives, and enrich their learning.

Contact Us

Our Education Outreach Manager, Dr. Becky Long, is available for advocacy meetings and can be reached via email becky@childrensbooksireland.ie or by phone **087 411 5922**.



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