

# Closing the Gap

Resource Pack for Migrant Parents  
to Support their Children's Education in Ireland

Resource Pack



Help with Homework



School Events



Help with Homework



Better Communication

Children Thrive at School...  
...Feeling Included and Supported!



# Welcome

The purpose of this booklet is to help immigrant parents to navigate the Irish school system.

Ireland has one of the highest rates of foreign-born residents in the EU (McGinnity et al. 2020). About 12% of people living in Ireland are not Irish nationals (CSO, 2022). The number of second-generation immigrant children has also grown over the last twenty years. Irish schools now include students from more than 160 nationalities, and over 14% of students have an immigrant background, which is slightly above the international average (Shiel et al., 2016 in McGinnity et al., 2020).

Migrant parents' involvement in their children's education is extremely important (O'Toole et al., 2019). Strong parental engagement is linked with fewer behavioural issues, better attendance, higher achievement, improved social skills, and greater confidence among students. It also helps build positive relationships between schools and families and creates supportive school environments where children can succeed (Oranga, Matere & Nyakundi 2023).

Studies of immigrant and refugee families show that parents are eager to support their children's learning, especially with early literacy and school tasks system (Horgan, O'Riordan & Maier, 2022; Antony-Newman, 2018; Yakhnich, 2015). Best practices include helping parents gain the confidence to advocate for their children, ask for changes when needed, or look for schools that better meet their children's needs. Simple tools like translation apps can also help parents understand homework or messages from teachers. However, in some cultures, families expect teachers, not parents, to handle all aspects of education, so getting involved in school may feel uncomfortable or inappropriate for some migrant parents. (Stagg Peterson, 2008).

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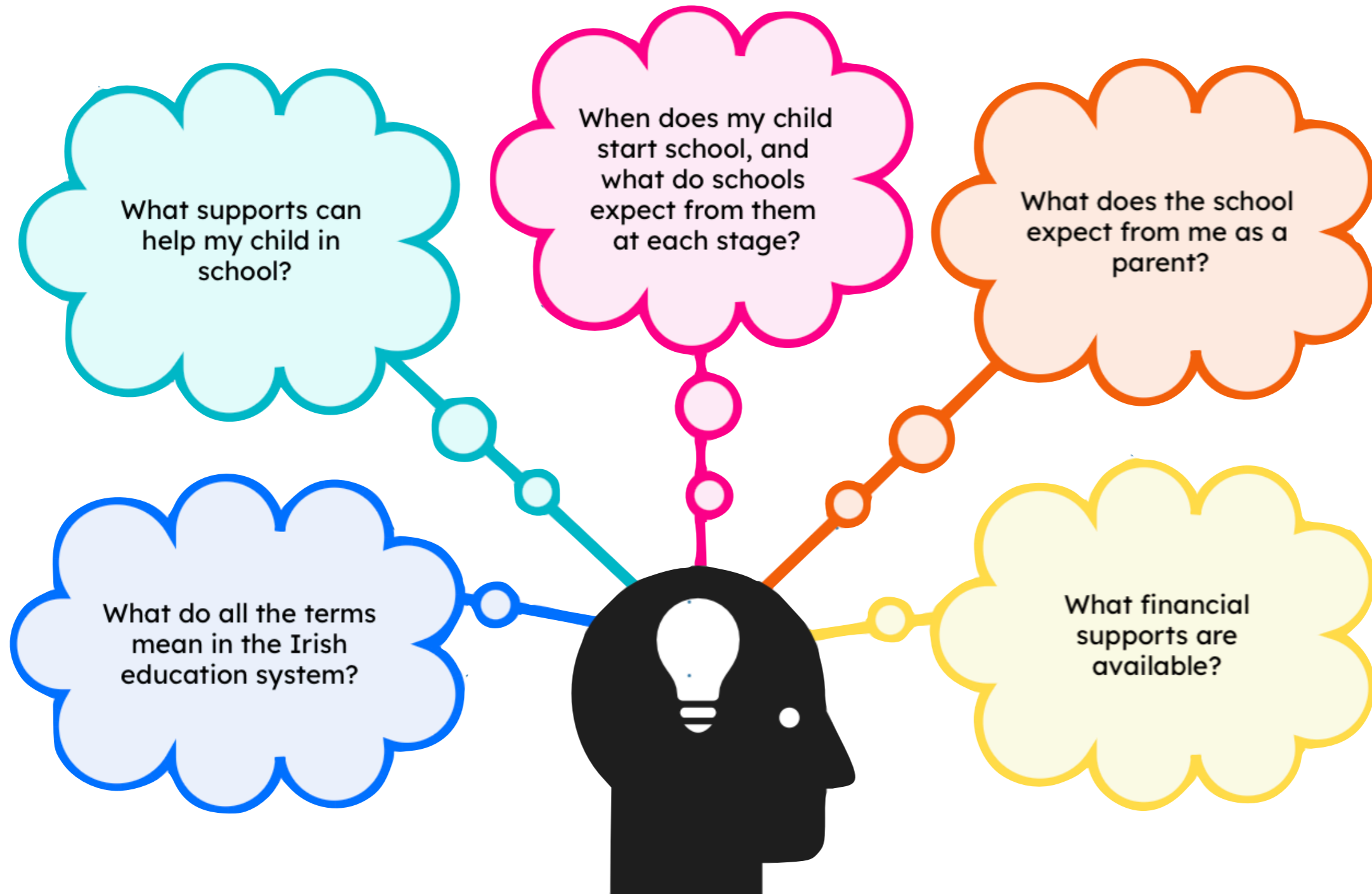
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# Key Questions



**Key questions you might ask as a migrant parent**

## When does my child start school?

Children aged 4 to 18 can attend State-funded primary or secondary school. To begin, contact your local school. They will tell you how to enroll your child.

### Pre-school

Generally, children under the age of 6 years old access some form of early childhood education

### Primary School

Typically starts around age 5-6 (Junior Infants, Senior Infants) and continues until 6th class (about age 11-12). In primary school: they will work through classes (1st to 6th) with a focus on literacy, numeracy, and general subjects.

### Secondary School

Begins around age 12-13 (1st year) and continues to around the age of 17-18 (6th year).

## Further and Higher Education

After your child finishes the Leaving Certificate, they can choose to go to university, an institute of technology, a further education college, or into an apprenticeship or training programme. Their options will depend on the points they earn in the Leaving Certificate and the subjects they studied. For college or university, their grades, Leaving Certificate points, subject choices, and any financial or other supports will affect what courses they can apply for.

# Stages in primary school

Your child must attend school when they are 6 years old. Most children start school when they are 5 years old. They will enter Junior Infants for their first year of school. This happens in September.

## Subjects in primary school

The primary school curriculum is divided into seven main parts. Some of these parts include different subjects. The seven parts are:

- Language: Irish and English
- Maths: Mathematics
- Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE): History, Geography and Science
- Arts Education: Music, Visual Arts (art) and Drama
- Physical Education: PE
- Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE): Learning about yourself, relationships and health
- Religious Education may also be part of the curriculum.

## Upcoming Change in Subjects

In 2026 and 2027, primary schools will change the curriculum. The current curriculum (which is above) will be replaced with:

- Arts education
- Language
- Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)
- Social and Environmental education
- Wellbeing

## Homework and tests

### Homework

Most schools in Ireland will give your child homework to do after school.

It is expected that this homework is completed before it is due. Many schools will ask parents or caregivers to acknowledge that they have checked that their child has completed their homework. This might be done in a homework journal or on the school website.

Homework might be written tasks, but it could also be learning. Children might be asked to learn how to spell words, what words translate to in Irish, learn their times tables, or more. It is a good idea to help your child to learn these things if you can, and to test them to see if they have learned them.

### Tests

All schools must give children three standardised tests while they are in primary school. These will happen during the end of first class or the start of second class, at the end of fourth class, and at the start of sixth class. These tests are set by the government and are the same for all students.

Schools might also give students regular tests, set by the teachers, to test their learning. These tests will show teachers (and you!) how your child is doing and if they need any extra supports.

# Stages in secondary school

Secondary school begins around age 12–13 (1st year) and continues to around the age of 17-18 (6th year).

## 1 Junior Cycle

The first stage of secondary school is the Junior Cycle, which ends in 3rd year. At the end of 3rd year, your child takes their first major national exam, the Junior Certificate. This exam helps your child choose subjects for the later years based on what they enjoy and what they do well in. Schools teach many subjects, like Maths, English, and History, at different levels. This helps each student learn at a level that suits their ability. Many schools also place students into groups based on ability (this is called streaming).

## 2 Transition Year (TY)

After the Junior Cycle, many students move into Transition Year (TY). TY is optional in some schools. It gives students a calmer year with new experiences such as work placements and special projects before they start the more demanding Senior Cycle

## 3 Senior Cycle

Next comes the Senior Cycle, which covers 5th and 6th year. At the end of 6th year, students take an exam called the Leaving Certificate. These results decide what courses they can apply for in college or university through a points system. Students can also choose other routes, such as the Leaving Cert Applied, which suits young people who prefer practical, hands-on learning or trades like carpentry, mechanics, or construction.

## Junior Cycle Subjects

In the Junior Cycle (the first three years of secondary school), students study several full subjects. Four subjects are compulsory - this means all students must study English, Irish (Gaeilge), Maths, and History. They can also choose some short courses, which take at least 100 hours to complete.

A big part of the Junior Cycle is Wellbeing. This includes classes like:

- SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education)
- CSPE (Civic, Social and Political Education)
- PE (Physical Education)

Most students study these subjects at Level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which is the normal level for Junior Cycle.

For students who find this level too difficult, there are extra programmes called Learning Programmes:

- L2LPs (Level 2 Learning Programmes)
  - L1LPs (Level 1 Learning Programmes)
- These are made for students who need more support and are at Level 2 or Level 1 on the NFQ scale.

# Subjects in secondary school

Secondary school begins around age 12–13 (1st year) and continues to around the age of 17-18 (6th year).

## Senior Cycle Subjects

There are many things to think about when your child is choosing their subjects for the Leaving Certificate. It's a good idea for them to do some research first. The website CourseFinder can help find college courses and what subjects and grades are needed to get in.

Most students will take seven subjects for their Leaving Cert. Some students may choose to study an extra subject outside of school.

Subjects can be taken at Higher Level or Ordinary Level. Two subjects - Irish and Maths - can also be taken at Foundation Level, which is easier.

Most students will take the following Compulsory Subjects:

- English
- Irish
- Maths

Then your child will choose four more subjects from a list of Optional Subjects. Your child is more likely to do well in subjects they enjoy. Enjoyment can reduce stress and make studying easier.

Most students choose a modern European language like French, German, or Spanish. This helps keep all college options open.

Many NUI colleges (like UCC, UCD, and University of Galway) require a third language for courses in areas like:

- Arts
- Social Science
- Medicine
- Business
- Tourism and Hospitality

Always check the course details to be sure.

## Senior Cycle Subject Areas

### *Science Subjects*

A Science subject is needed for some courses, especially in:

- Health professions (like Nursing, Medicine, Physiotherapy)
- Dentistry and Medicine may need two science subjects

Science subjects include: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Agricultural Science

Biology is the most popular science subject. But students who are strong in Maths may prefer Chemistry or Physics.

### *Practical Subjects*

Some subjects have project work that counts towards the final grade. Examples of project subjects include: Art, Home Economics, Design and Communication Graphics (DCG), Construction Studies, Agricultural Science, History and Geography (coursework), Religious Education, Music, Engineering, LCVP (Link Modules)

These projects often have deadlines close together, so it's important to plan ahead.

### *Choosing Subjects That Work Well Together*

Some subjects overlap and can make studying easier. For example:

- Biology and Home Economics both cover human body topics
- Physics and Applied Maths are linked
- Agricultural Science has some content from Biology and Geography
- LCVP works well with Business
- 

### *Maths Bonus Points*

If your child takes Higher Level Maths and passes with a H1 to H6, they get 25 extra points for the Leaving Cert. Some courses require Foundation Level Maths, and more colleges are now accepting this level. You can filter for these on CourseFinder.

# What does the school expect from me?



## Attendance Rules

By law, every child in Ireland under the age of 16 must go to school. As a parent or guardian, you are responsible for making sure your child attends school every day.

- Absences: If your child is sick or cannot go to school, you must tell the school the reason why.
- Holidays: You generally cannot take your child out of school for long holidays during the school term.
- Reporting: If your child misses 20 days or more in a school year, the school must report this to Tusla (the Child and Family Agency).

## Supporting your child

Schools expect parents to stay involved in their child's education. A good relationship between you and the school helps your child do well. You should try to:

- Help with homework: Support your child with their daily homework. Check that your child has done their homework at the end of every day.
- Go to meetings: Attend parent-teacher meetings. This is your chance to discuss how your child is doing with their work, and how they are feeling socially and emotionally.
- Attend events: Go to school activities, such as plays, concerts, and sports days.
- Communicate: Keep in regular contact with the teachers.

## What the school will do

Most Irish schools have clear policies about how they communicate with parents and guardians. You can usually expect:

- Regular updates: Schools send newsletters, emails, text messages, or app notifications about events, holidays, school closures, and other important information.
- Parent-Teacher Meetings: These usually happen once or twice a year. You meet your child's teacher to hear about their progress and ask questions.
- Reports on learning: Schools give end-of-year reports or regular progress updates about how your child is doing.
- Extra support updates: If your child has additional learning needs, the school may arrange meetings with the Special Education Teacher (SET), create an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and update you more often.
- Clear policies for concerns: Schools have guidelines explaining how to raise issues or make complaints if something worries you.

# What does the school expect from me?



## Strengths you bring

- Your languages are a strength: Speaking more than one language helps your child's identity and learning. Children learn multiple languages easily, so keep using your home language -- it benefits them.
- You have resilience: Moving to a new country is stressful, but it often makes people strong and adaptable. This resilience can help you support your child's education.
- You offer a fresh point of view: You may have different ways of helping with homework, studying, or organising things. These can support your child and even complement what the school does. Don't be afraid to use the methods that work best for you.

## Common challenges

- Not knowing the school system: Ask the school to explain how things work. Use this information pack, talk to other parents, and consider joining the parents' association.
- Limited time because of work: If you can't attend school meetings during the day, ask for an appointment at a different time, or ask for a phone call, email update, or video meeting instead.
- Cultural differences: Things like school lunches, clothes or hairstyles may be different from what you're used to. Talk to your child and speak with their teacher if you have concerns.
- Changing schools or arriving in Ireland during the school year: Ask the new school what supports are available for things like books, uniforms, learning help, or settling in.

## What you, as a parent can bring

- Keep your contact details updated: Make sure the school has your correct phone number, email and address. Tell them if your home language is not English. Some schools can offer help with translation.
- Check school messages: Look out for newsletters, texts, emails or letters. If you don't understand something, ask the school to explain it simply or ask someone you trust to help.
- Address any needs early: If your child is struggling with English, learning, settling into a new school, or social issues, speak with their teacher. You can also ask community or migrant support groups for help in preparing what to say.
- Go to Parent-Teacher Meetings: Bring questions with you, such as "How is my child doing?", "How can I help at home?", or "Do they need extra support?" If you don't feel confident going alone, you can ask someone from a support organisation to come with you.
- Read your child's school report: Ask the school to explain anything you don't understand, especially comments or grades.
- Support learning at home: Talk to your child about their school day and homework. Help them build good routines like regular study time, breaks, and a good sleep schedule.
- Help your child settle: If your child is adjusting after moving country, check in with them about friendships, schoolwork, and any challenges. Migration can be stressful and open conversations help.
- Build a positive partnership with the school: Schools value good relationships with parents. Showing interest, even by asking questions or visiting the school, tells your child that home and school are working together to support them.

# Financial supports available

## Pre-school

### National Childcare Scheme (NCS)

The NCS gives extra financial support for childcare outside the free pre-school hours. It works alongside the ECCE programme.

There are three types of NCS supports:

1. Universal
2. Income-Assessed

For information about Universal or Income-Assessed supports, contact [www.ncs.gov.ie](http://www.ncs.gov.ie) or call +353 1 906 8530.

3. Sponsor Referrals If you have Temporary Protection, the NCS can cover the full cost of childcare through a sponsorship referral.

A sponsoring agency, like Tusla, must make this referral. Your Tusla support worker will fill out the referral form with you. The form will explain: how many childcare hours you can use each week (up to 45 hours) how long the referral lasts (usually one year). You can use these hours in any Tusla-registered childcare service that takes part in the scheme.

## Pre-school

### Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE)

The ECCE programme gives all children two free years of pre-school before they start primary school.

- It runs from September to June.
- Children attend for three hours a day, five days a week.
- Your child can start the ECCE programme in the September after they turn 2 years and 8 months.
- The scheme ends when your child reaches 5 years and 6 months.

If you have questions about ECCE, you can email [eyqueries@dcya.ie](mailto:eyqueries@dcya.ie).

## Primary and secondary school supports

Public primary and secondary education is free for all children, including those who have moved here. There are private schools too, but these charge fees and are optional. Although school is free, there are some costs you may need to pay for including School uniforms and books and extra activities, such as swimming lessons or school trips.

 Clothing and Footwear.

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance helps families with lower incomes pay for uniforms and shoes. You may qualify if you receive a social welfare payment or are in an approved training scheme.

 Schoolbooks


Free schoolbooks schemes are being introduced this year (2025)


 School Transport Most families pay a fee for the school bus.


However, transport may be free if: You have a medical card. Your child has special educational needs. You live very far from the nearest school (RemoteArea Grants are available)

## Additional supports

 English Language Support: There is support available for children who need help learning English. You can ask your child's school about these supports.

 Special Educational Needs: Special Assistance teachers are available to support children with additional needs (such as autism or ADHD). Schools can also get government grants to buy assistive technology, like computers or special equipment, for students with disabilities.

 Home School Community Liaison: Many schools have a specific teacher who acts as a link between the school and your home to offer extra support if needed.

 School Meals: While children generally bring a packed lunch, many primary schools now provide free hot lunches.

 Health and Wellbeing: Schools can help refer your child to support services for mental health issues (such as anxiety or grief) or additional needs.

**This checklist is designed to help you support your child's education**



	Contact details of my child's school (phone, email, website).
	Name of my child's / children's school teacher and/or year head and/or Principal
	Dates and times of my child's school events (sports day, concerts, parent teacher meetings, information sessions)
	Check my child's diary every day and sign it once the homework is done.



# Glossary of terms



## Types of educational settings

**Junior Cycle:** first 3 years of secondary school up to Junior Certificate exam.

**Senior Cycle:** last years of secondary school, leading to Leaving Certificate.

**Leaving Certificate:** the main state exam at the end of secondary school; results (“points”) are used for higher education entry.

**Transition Year (TY):** a year (often 4th year) offering new experience (work placements, projects) before senior study.

**Further Education & Training (FET):** post-secondary education that may lead into higher education or employment.

**Higher Education:** universities, institutes of technology, etc.

## School personnel and management

**Board of Management / Principal / Teachers:** the school leadership and staff.

**Parent/Teacher Meetings, Reports, School Policies:** ways you will communicate with the school.

**Board of Management (BoM):** The group which governs the school, including management, staff and board members.

**SET:** Special Education Teacher - helps children with additional learning needs.

**Parent Association (PA):** A group of parents who meet and collaborate with the school to support children’s learning and school community.

## School communications

**Homework Diary / Homework Journal:** A notebook (often used in primary schools) where homework and teacher messages are written.

**Aladdin Connect / School App / Portal:** Many schools use an online system where parents can see notices, term dates, events, reports.

**IEP:** Individual Education Plan - a plan for a child with identified learning needs.



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