

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland**

**Response to Consultation on Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs (DCEDIYA) Statement of Strategy 2021-2023**

**(November 2020)**

The TUI represents teachers, lecturers and staff (19,000+) in schools, colleges and in out of school services employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools, Youthreach, institutes of technology and technological universities.

Following a request for submissions on a Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 from the DCEDIYA, the TUI makes the enclosed points. The TUI restricts this submission to education and youth issues and does not propose to comment on other aspects of the work, or internal processes, of the DCEDIYA. The TUI welcomes this opportunity to make a submission and hopes that the DCEDIYA considers our submission carefully. It is regrettable that the TUI’s recent experiences of ‘consultation’ with the DCEDIYA have been unsatisfactory at best. Those experiences are best illustrated by the tokenistic consultation engaged in by the then DCYA in relation to the introduction of revised child protection procedures in 2017 and the introduction of the policy blueprint for the development of educational services in 2019. The TUI earnestly hopes that this process of engagement into the Statement of Strategy is indeed a meaningful process and we make our submission in that hope and expectation. During 2019 the then DCYA agreed to have ongoing discussions with the education unions on topics of mutual interest. Sadly those consultations have since been few and far between. One such consultation ended in the then DCYA stating that it wouldn’t be involved in “Marlborough Street style consultation” – presumably a derogatory reference to the consultation which frequently take place between the Department of Education and the teaching unions.

**Background**

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system and a respected teaching profession (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018a; OECD, 2015a; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nOg, 2017; Growing Up in Ireland, 2017; IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017; Boyle, 2019; Scanlon & McKenna, 2018; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; Kantar Millward Brown, 2018; EU Commission, 2018; EU Commission, 2019a; EU Commission, 2019b; Social Progress Initiative, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2018; Social Progress Initiative, 2020; Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2018; HEA, 2019; Coolahan, 2017; Eivers, 2019; CSO, 2019a; McKeown et al., 2019; CSO, 2020b; OECD, 2020a; Eurofound, 2020; McNamara et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020) despite spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015b; SJI, 2018, NERI, 2018, OECD, 2019a; UNDP, 2019; OECD, 2020b) and experiencing historic underinvestment (DES, 2018b). Indeed citizen satisfaction with the education system in Ireland is the highest of any of 22 European countries studied (Boyle, 2018). It is also worthwhile noting that 2019 data (OECD, 2019b) shows that both citizen satisfaction with the education system, and the economic return to the taxpayer of investment in education, are both extraordinarily high in Ireland compared to international norms. An Ipsos MRBI survey in 2019 found extraordinarily high levels of public trust in teachers, much higher than for journalists, Gardai, civil servants, politicians, business leaders, social media influencers, bankers or even the “ordinary person in the street” (Irish Times January 31st 2019). ESRI (2020) found young people had very high levels of trust in the Irish education system.

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015). In 2008, we had the second highest proportion of 10-14-year olds in the European Union (CSO, 2009). The high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future. The DES (2012a, 2017) suggests that the number of students in the post-primary school system will rise by almost one hundred thousand in second level between 2011 and 2025 (322,528 to 416,897). The latest projections are that numbers in post-primary will peak at 402,000 in 2024/25 and fall gradually back to 2015 levels by 2036 (Government of Ireland, 2020). It is also expected that the number of students in higher education will rise by approximately thirty thousand in the forthcoming years (DES, 2018d). In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world-class child society can be achieved with inadequate resources of time, money or personnel.

It is also worth noting that the Irish Government has itself acknowledged the problems of student growth in third level being twinned with under-investment and has labelled it as a key strategic risk to the country. Government of Ireland (2019: 39) stated that

“*Recently published statistics estimate that demand for third level places will increase each year up to 2030, rising from the base level of 184,000 (in 2017) to peak at over 220,000 students by 2030. The continued re-investment in HE, combined with the development of a longer-term sustainable funding model, will be necessary in order to continue to aid the growth and quality of our HE system in the years ahead.*”

In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world-class in-school or out-of-school support system can be sustained with inadequate resources of time, money or personnel. Pre-service and in-service training should be available to teachers who wish to avail of it. Such training should not place a burden on teachers, either in terms of time or money.

Child and Youth Centred

The TUI welcomes the child and youth centred approach demonstrated by the establishment and ongoing work of the DCEDIYA. The mission of the DCEDIYA “is to lead the effort to improve outcomes for children and young people in Ireland” (DCYA, 2012: 2). Such a child/youth centred approach must be supported by adequate resources. As stated above, Ireland has a very young population. The budget currently available to agencies relevant to children and schools is inadequate to meet the level of need so it is vital that the new strategy not be funded ‘within existing (inadequate) resources’.

As stated above, Ireland has a highly respected education system even though the DES (2018b) itself recognises “historic underinvestment”. The success of the education system, for example in ensuring that 90% of students complete Senior Cycle (DES, 2012b), comes in the context of significant cutbacks in the education system especially in pastoral supports such as middle management (e.g. year head) and guidance posts. Cutbacks to School Completion Programmes (SCP) for example are deeply unhelpful in maintaining gains made in reducing early school leaving. Those cutbacks amount to approximately one-quarter of the entire SCP budget (Irish Times, April 22nd 2017; Smyth et al., 2015), notwithstanding some amelioration of those cuts in 2020.

The previous paragraph made reference to cuts affecting pastoral systems in schools such as guidance and middle management. Some marginal alleviation of those cuts has occurred in recent years but the improvements are indeed marginal. The work of the DCEDYA is closely associated with creating a child/youth-centred system for the modern age. Bullying is a serious difficulty experienced by many young people (Gleeson, 2014; Barnardos, 2008; Lodge and Lynch, 2004; Downes and Gilligan, 2007) though it is important to note that Irish children and students are significantly less likely to encounter chronic bullying than the OECD average (OECD 2017; UNICEF, 2018). Cyberbullying has become the latest manifestation of bullying but is perhaps even more insidious as the victim can never really ‘switch off’ due to the pervasiveness of technology in the life of a young person (O’Moore and Stevens, 2013). Young people must be protected to the greatest extent possible and hence it is essential that the DCEDIYA encourages all Government departments and agencies to support schools and youth groups through provision of expertise and resources to limit the spread of cyberbullying in schools/youth spaces. Furthermore, parents must be supported in taking on their responsibilities in regard to preventing cyberbullying in the time young people spend outside of schools. Young people spend only a small proportion of their childhoods in school settings so the main focus in terms of preventing cyberbullying must logically and necessarily be on out-of-school settings.

No child-centred model can be achieved to any appreciable extent without dealing with the relative poverty in which many children and their families live. Almost 20% of children in Ireland are at risk of poverty and almost 10% live in consistent poverty (NERI, 2013; CSO, 2020a) and 18.3% of children are living in relative income poverty (UNICEF, 2017). CSO (2019b) shows that in 2018, the ‘at risk of poverty’ rate for all citizen age groups was 14.0% and the consistent poverty rate in 2018 was 5.6%. How we treat children is a key measure of how we as a society can be measured. It is perverse and unacceptable that in a first world country, TUI members frequently see students come to school cold or hungry due to lack of money at home, or excessively tired due to having to work in or outside of the home in caring duties or paid employment, respectively. Schools do what they can, with the support of initiatives such as School Completion (where available), by providing breakfast clubs and other assistive interventions but the problem shouldn’t exist in the first place. Unfortunately funding to the School Completion Programme has been cut by approximately a quarter since 2008 (Smyth et al., 2015). The social welfare system must ensure that families are given the protections necessary to ensure that parents can both meet the basic needs of their children and protect each child’s time in, and capacity to derive full benefit from, the public education system. In the meantime, it is essential that funding available to all schools such as the capitation grant, as well as funding aimed especially at DEIS schools, be increased to the level required to support the needs now manifesting. DEIS is working (ERC, 2014; Archways, 2017) and should continue. It must however also be borne in mind that 56-61% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attend non-DEIS schools (Barnardos, 2009) so the needs of those schools also must be recognised. It is important, in this context, that the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme be provided with additional staffing and resources so that it can be provided in non-DEIS schools as well as DEIS schools.

A child-centred society also benefits from efforts to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. The DCYA has a responsibility to provide other services which could break the cycle of poverty and inequality. Such services could include:

* Homework clubs;
* Community youth initiatives to counteract children drifting into substance misuse;
* Second change initiatives for parents;
* Initiatives that promote involvement in sport;
* Youth clubs.

Research

The Research Unit can play a vital role in commissioning, analysing and disseminating research. The TUI would welcome additional research into the lives of children and youth. For example, the Growing Up in Ireland study is yielding excellent data. Such research, however, must take account of the administrative burden involved and the data protection issues arising. The DCEDIYA need to be adequately resourced if this is to be successful. The DCEDIYA could also support research by funding the Irish component of the OECD TALIS study. It is regrettable that this important study into the education system is not seen as important by the Irish government.

Child Protection

The last twenty years in Ireland have seen a dramatic change in the priority attached to child protection. The National Vetting Bureau plays a key role in this. It is important that sufficient resources be provided to the National Vetting Bureau to ensure that its vital work can be discharged effectively. It is also essential that adequate protection be given to ‘unaccompanied minors’ who are particularly vulnerable in our society. It is also important that proper procedures be put in place so that accused persons are investigated in the first instance and that double jeopardy be avoided as much as possible.

Youth Services

Youth Services provide vital support to vulnerable young people. It is essential that cuts to Youth Services (NYCI, 2016) be reversed in full. The small alleviations which have been made since Budget 2017 are still inadequate.

Existing Under-investment

As stated above, the TUI is acutely aware of under-investment in education and youth services, but there is also serious under-investment in a number of agencies which are vital to the creation and maintenance of a child-centred society. It is essential that the DCEDIYA exercises all the powers available to it to cajole, encourage and, if necessary, coerce other Government departments into providing the necessary resources to agencies within their remit. The DES (2018b) has itself publicly acknowledged under-investment.

The TUI recognises that this issue is beyond the immediate remit of the DCEDIYA but the department has significant influence on how other government departments and agencies may support schools and colleges. Schools rely heavily on support agencies, especially when working with students with special needs or students experiencing crisis.

Many of these support services are vital if a student with SEN or SEBD is to be adequately supported. For example, in 2015, less than half of the recommended 127 specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) teams had been established, 472 children in care did not have a social worker, 673 children in care did not have a care plan whilst there are 8,161 child protection cases which had not been allocated a social worker including 2,829 deemed ‘high priority’ (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2015). In March 2018, 2,691 children and young adults were waiting for a CAMHS appointment, including 386 who were waiting more than 12 months and 128 who were waiting more than 18 months (Irish Times September 10th, 2018). In January 2019 the situation was only very slightly better with 2,523 children on a HSE CAMHS waiting list (PSI, 2019). The Inspector of Mental Health Services has stated that only 49% of HSE mental health rehabilitation teams have been established (RTE, 10th October 2019). Mental health services overall are short 2,422 whole time equivalents (WTEs) on what government policy said in 2006 was needed (12,354 based on the 2016 census) and some areas, including much of Dublin, have “less than half the staff” deemed to be necessary (Irish Times, December 28th 2019). As noted in a study in Dublin by McCarthy Quinn and Comiskey (2019: 69) only a small number of young people suffering severe emotional stress “are in contact with an agency that can assist, there is known to be a hidden cohort of young people who are not visible to the health services”. Downes (2020) has stated that in Sweden and Slovenia “all students have access to a school doctor, school nurse, psychologist and school welfare officer at no cost”.

In November 2018, 37,473 children were “in some health queue waiting for an assessment for mental health, disability or speech and language problems” (Irish Independent Nov 28th, 2018). Schools are trying to support a child in accessing speech and language therapy for example (Irish Examiner, September 22nd, 2014). Children’s Rights Alliance (2018) highlights the 314 children who have been waiting over one year for a speech and language therapy assessment. Furthermore, according to the Childcare Law Reporting Project, in relation to applications for secure care – where a child is detained in a special unit providing specialised care and education where they have very high needs - there are 26 secure care beds in the State “and only 14 of them are available mainly due to staffing problems” (Irish Times, January 13th 2020). In February 2020, a review by the Mental Health Commission concluded that there was "an almost total absence" of community mental health services across the State (RTE News February 19th 2020).

As stated by the Children’s Commissioner (2019: 2)

“Across a typical class of thirty students:

* 6 are growing up at risk due to family circumstances, of whom 4 are living in a household where domestic violence, substance misuse and/or severe mental health problems are present.
* 4 children have an identified special educational need.
* 4 children have a mental health issue, but only 1 will be accessing mental health services.”

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has, on a number of occasions, outlined its concerns about inadequate community adolescent mental health services. Indeed, IHREC (2019: 28) stated clearly that

“There were 6,811 children awaiting a psychology appointment across all Community Healthcare Organisations at the end of July 2017, of which 2,186 were waiting more than a year. There is no primary care psychology service to refer children to in North Dublin.”

In January 2019, there were 29 vacant posts of child and adolescent psychiatrists across the country (RTE News, February 1st, 2019). Furthermore, in a study of 33 countries, Ireland had the seventh highest ratio of students to school psychologists i.e. 5,298:1 as opposed to 927:1 in Denmark for example (Jimerson et al., 2009). The average in the study was 3,709:1. For Ireland to reach reasonable rate of 2500 students per psychologist, taking into account demographic group, would require the employment of 267 more psychologists by 2021 (Impact, 2015). Understaffing in National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is also a concern of the Oireachtas (2018). In 2017, there were 2,767 children waiting for a first appointment with CAMHS whilst Ireland has the fourth highest incidence of teenage suicide in the European Union (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2018). OCO (2018:4) made clear that it is “concerned with staffing problems in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services which means that children experiencing escalating levels of stress and anxiety are often unable to access the emergency supports they need.”

This is all within the context that during 2014, the then Tusla Chief Executive publicly stated that the Agency required additional funding of €45 million “just to stand still” (Irish Times, December 30th, 2014). Indeed, Tusla (2018) stated that “while additional funding has been agreed for 2018, significant additional funding will be required for 2019 and 2020”. Budget 2019 did give Tusla an increase in its budget of €30m to €786m (Irish Examiner October 9th 2018) but gaps remain. As recently as March 2018, Tusla was short almost three hundred social workers (TheJournal.ie March 28th, 2018) and more than 4,000 children who were referred to protection and welfare services were waiting to be allocated a social worker (Irish Independent March 29th, 2018). In 2018 Tusla recruited 150 social workers, but in the same time frame lost 150 social workers through resignation or retirement (Oireachtas, 2019).

Concerns about mental health, and the adequacy or otherwise of support services have also been expressed in Reilly (2015), Mental Health Reform (2018), Mental Health Commission (2018) and RCSI (2013). The Programme for Government 2016-2018 promised 238 psychologists in NEPS by 2018. In October 2018 there were only 172 wholetime equivalents in post (DES, 2018c). The TUI notes the recent Budget 2021 announcement regarding NEPS staffing but even then the numbers fall far short of government targets from 2016.

RTE News (September 23rd, 2018) reported that less than 10% of the number of staff required for CAMHS intellectual disabilities were in place. This compounds difficulties in schools caused by the loss of pastoral supports such as Assistant Principal positions, a situation that the DES (2014) itself described as “unsustainable”. In October 2018, 36,531 people were waiting for speech and language therapy (SLT) with a further 32,103 waiting for occupational therapy (OT). One-quarter of those waiting for an OT assessment had been waiting more than a year (Sunday Independent, December 16th, 2018).

In many cases Educational Welfare Officers seem to be leaving Tusla as fast as they can be recruited. Hence vacancies, both permanent and temporary, have not been filled. Furthermore, School Completion programmes have been stripped back and the lack of standardisation of SCP roles means vital supports to students and schools are been lost. Cuts to the SCP programme amount to approximately one-quarter of its pre-recession budget (Irish Times, April 22nd 2017). The DE will, during the course of this Statement of Strategy, have influence on this as Tusla Education Support Services are due to come within the remit of the DE.

Students in Need

The attrition affecting guidance counselling services in schools, since the withdrawal of the ex-quota allocation, has had a dramatic impact on supports available to students experiencing additional needs. As referenced above, surveys carried out by the TUI (2014), ASTI (2014), IGC (2016; 2019) and the NGCE (2013) have all shown the difficulties which have arisen. Perhaps the single worst impact is the reduction of provision of one-to-one guidance/counselling support e.g. since September 2012 there has been a fall of 53% in one-to-one counselling (IGC, 2016). McCoy et al. (2014) found that one-to-one sessions were essential to students but often not available even before the cut in the ex-quota allocation. The DCEDIYA should address this issue with other Government departments and agencies, in order to protect students in need or experiencing mental health issues.

Movement of Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) to the Department of Education

In June 2020 An Taoiseach announced that TESS would be moving from the then DCYA to the Department of Education. The TUI welcomed the move but is concerned that four months later it is unclear when the move might take place and what discussions will be had with relevant stakeholders such as the TUI about how reporting and consultative mechanisms will work.

Conclusion

The DCEDIYA has an important contribution to make in ensuring that other government departments put children and young people at the centre of our society. The TUI asks that the above recommendations and concerns be at the centre of the new DCEDIYA Statement of Strategy. To summarise, the key actions that could be included in the DCEDIYA Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 should be:

* Adequate funding of SCP;
* Adequate funding of Youth Services;
* Significantly increased funding of Tusla;
* Greater and more meaningful consultation with the education partners;
* Expansion of the HSCL scheme;
* Exerting pressure on other Government departments and State agencies outside of the DCEDIYA to reverse cuts to services vital to the education system such as CAMHs, NEPS, school pastoral support systems;
* Ongoing support of research projects such as Growing Up in Ireland;
* Clarity around the future of the Tusla Education Support Service.

**Ends**

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**Acronyms**

ASTI Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland

C&C Community and Comprehensive

CAMHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

DCEDIYA Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs

DCYA Department of Children and Youth Affairs

DE Department of Education

DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES Department of Education and Skills

ECCE Early Childhood Care and Education

ETB Education and Training Board

HE Higher Education

HSCL Home School Community Liaison

HSE Health Service Executive

IGC Institute of Guidance Counsellors

NCGE National Centre for Guidance in Education

NEPS National Educational Psychological Service

OECD Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

SCP School Completion Programme

SEBD Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

SEN Special Educational Needs

TESS Tusla Education Support Service

TUI Teachers’ Union of Ireland

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