

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland**

**Response to “Developing the Statement of Strategy for School Attendance”**

**(August 2015)**

TUI represents education staff (16,000+) employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and in Community and Comprehensive (C&C) Schools, teachers in further and adult education and lecturers and researchers in the Institutes of Technology. Following a request for submissions on “*Developing the Statement of Strategy for School Attendance”* from TUSLA, TUI respectfully makes the enclosed points.

TUI welcomes this comprehensive and well-researched document. It will prove to be a useful aide to school staffs and Boards of Management as they continue to do excellent work in trying to prevent and address this problem.

TUI however, must point out some areas of the document that would benefit from further development:

1. Pastoral supports in schools, which are critical to addressing many educational problems including attendance, have been denuded and diminished over recent years. These supports include, but are not limited to, posts of responsibility and ex-quota guidance. Such supports are critical in addressing issues of attendance, but also of preventing such problems in the first place.

TUI takes particular exception to the sentence

*”Arrangements for analysing data should be in place, within available resources, and all school personnel should be clear about who has this responsibility. It may be beneficial to create an Attendance Committee or designate a specific role to scrutinise and monitor attendance data”.*

This is simply not realistic in the light of additional workload that has been put on schools in recent years. Schools have suffered multiple cuts to their resources whilst dealing with families who have themselves suffered due to economic crisis. Al of this has occurred whilst education staff have incurred multiple cuts to their pay.

1. Essential national programmes are now, or are soon to be, ‘under review’ such as School Completion, DEIS and the Junior Cycle Schools Programme.
2. Support services, upon which schools rely heavily to deal with many problems including absenteeism, are underfunded. These include speech and language therapy, Education Welfare Services, VTS, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, social workers and psychological support services. There have been many instances of NEWB/EWOs not returning calls from principals for understandable reasons (under-resourced, moratorium etc.). Early intervention is essential but that means that a student should not have to be on the critical list to get the support he/she needs. It is not yet clear whether the Inclusion Support Service will have the resources necessary to address the level of need already apparent.
3. Some schools already have excellent tracking systems, in many cases based on software systems. Other schools may require funding to perfect such systems and to provide training to staff to make the most of the functionality provided by the software.
4. Schools sometimes struggle to make contact to ‘hard to reach’ parents who may be deliberately avoiding repeated communication from the school. Schools may need additional support to communicate successfully with this small cohort of families.
5. The document focuses on the positive role played by extra-curricular activities in minimising absenteeism. Regrettably the level of provision of extra-curricular activities in schools has fallen in recent years due to time pressures put on schools and as a consequence of repeated pay cuts and simultaneous increases in the number of hours staff are expected to attend school meetings. A recent survey by TUI found that the proportion of teachers who organised extra-curricular activities had fallen from over sixty percent in 2007 to approximately forty percent in 2015. The single biggest factor cited by teachers for the fall in extra-curricular involvement was the increasing workload they were encountering in the teaching and administrative roles.

Conclusion:

School attendance has been a serious problem for some students and communities in Ireland for some time. Existing initiatives have made some in-roads but much more needs to be done. However, the problem remains and is a particular issue for schools which share many of the difficulties encountered by DEIS schools, but which fall just outside the criteria for inclusion in DEIS provision. The recent ESRI report on “Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS” specifically cites the “sharp withdrawal” of support suffered by schools which fall just outside the parameters of DEIS.

Many studies have mapped the extent of the problem of school attendance and offered possible solutions. However, it is unlikely that any radical improvement can be expected until there is an increase in educational investment in areas such as pastoral supports, community supports, and school level supports. Investment in home school liaison support and in referral services is also necessary.

Abbreviations:

DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

EWO Education Welfare Officer

NEWB National Education Welfare Board

TUI Teachers’ Union of Ireland

VTS Visiting Teacher Service

**Ends**

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