

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland**

**Response to Consultation on DEIS**

**(May 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 DEIS Strategy from the Department of Education and Skills, TUI respectfully makes the enclosed points.

Educational disadvantage was first raised as a concern in Ireland in the 1960’s. Greater availability of, and access to, education led to concerns about equality of access, participation and outcome. By the 1980’s, it was clear that different social classes benefited to different degrees from education (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). This is not confined to Ireland. In England for example, children from higher professional backgrounds are 8.1 times more likely to get 5 or more, good GCSE passes than students from manual backgrounds (Connolly, 2009). The issue also tends to be gendered i.e. in 2008, 79% of 18 year old women in Ireland were students compared to 68% of their male peers (CSO, 2008). At a recent conference in Edinburgh (May 2015), Beatriz Pont from the OECD made the important point that you can’t have an excellent education system if you don’t have equity and further pointed out that “investing in equity pays off”. The Irish Education Act of 1998 defined educational disadvantage in terms of the “impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools.” Since then studies indicate that though all social classes have increased their participation and performance since 1979, the gap between professional and working classes of those who complete the Leaving Certificate has not been significantly reduced (Smyth and Hannan, 2000; Smyth, 1999). Furthermore, there is evidence of a widening gap between the social classes in entry to third-level institutions (Smyth and Hannan, 2000).”

What are the causes?

Studies by the Comptroller and Auditor General (2006), and by Downes and Gilligan (2007), found the causes to be:

* Socio-economic status of family. For example, in the United Kingdom children eligible for free schools meals do less well in science, maths, writing and reading than those not eligible for free meals (Connolly, 2009).
* Addiction in the home.
* Low educational attainment by parents and older siblings. For example, the higher the education level of the mother, the better the child performs in maths and vocabulary (ESRI, 2009). First and fifth class students whose mother is a graduate perform significantly better in reading than those whose mother has no qualification (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). Fifty-eight percent of students from higher professional backgrounds achieve four or more honours grades in the Leaving Certificate whereas sixteen of students from manual backgrounds do so (Barnardos, 2009).
* Poor attendance.
* Literacy and numeracy difficulties in the home. DEIS primary and second level schools have much higher levels of literacy, numeracy, emotional/behavioural and absenteeism problems than non-DEIS schools (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). In terms of literacy difficulties in DEIS schools, twenty-seven percent of first and sixth class children, and thirty percent of third class children perform at or below the tenth percentile (McGough, 2007).
* Lack of understanding by parents and, as a result, by children of the benefits of education.
* Inability or unwillingness of parents to help the child with homework.
* Low expectations of parents for children. A study by Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002) found that “even when level of demonstrated ability is held constant, children of more advantaged class origins take more ambitious educational options than do children of less advantaged backgrounds.”
* Family breakdown.

What are the effects?

The effects of educational disadvantage include:

* Absenteeism and punctuality issues.
* Poor academic performance. In the OECD (OECD, 2006), students from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds are 3.5 times more likely in the OECD (3.6 times in Ireland) to be the lowest Maths performers in the PISA study than those students who come from the highest socio-economic status.
* Behavioural problems.
* Low self esteem.
* Weak speech and vocabulary.
* Poor health and poor concentration.
* Early school drop-out.
* Unemployment. In the OECD (OECD, 2009), completing upper secondary education reduces the unemployment rate among 20-24 year olds by 6.7 percentage points and among 25-29 year olds by 6.1 percentage points. Male school leavers are 3.5 times more likely to be unemployed whilst female early school leavers are 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed (Smyth and McCoy, 2009).
* Lower income throughout the lifespan. For example, someone in Ireland with no formal qualifications will earn from employment 24% less than those with upper second level. Someone with a third level qualification will earn from employment 45% more than the person with upper second level (OECD, 2006).
* Impact on the economy as a whole. In the United States, cost benefit analysis suggests that keeping children in school benefits the economy to the tune of $209,100 per student (Barnardos, 2009).

Smyth and McCoy (2009) found that we can measure educational inequality in terms of:

* Reading scores at primary level
* Literacy scores on entry to second level
* Performance in the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations
* Retention in second level
* Progression to higher education

A symbol of the inequality in our system is that “the State invests 2.5 times more money per capita in the education of those who complete three years of third level education than it does for those who leave school before the completion of post-primary education.” (CORI, 2005)

What have we done about it and has it worked?

To date most initiatives aimed at reducing educational disadvantage have been aimed at DEIS schools.

“However, it is not at all evident that all, or even the majority of, disadvantaged students attend DEIS schools. Unfortunately, no evidence is available on the primary sector but a national survey of school leavers indicates that sixty-one per cent of young people from semi/unskilled manual backgrounds and fifty-six per cent of those from non-employed households attend non-DEIS schools.” (Smyth and McCoy, 2009).

A study by Archer and Weir (2004) suggested that responses to education disadvantage should encompass

* Smaller classes particularly in the early grades. For example, lowering class sizes below twenty is associated with modest increases in academic achievement. Small class sizes are particularly effective if targeted at pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (Archer and Weir, 2004) Being in a small class has a positive effect on academic achievement and participants are more likely to complete high school. Effects are more marked for disadvantaged groups and those who remain in small classes for an extended period. Those in classes with fewer than seventeen students for a period of three years were almost six months ahead of their peers in reading achievement (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). Despite the mixed results of the Rutland Street project, the evaluation still showed that participants were more likely to obtain educational qualifications at second level than members of the control group (Archer and Weir, 2004).
* Pre-school provision emphasizing prevention.
* A high degree of parental involvement. Parents who were involved in the home school community liaison scheme had greater confidence afterwards in their own capacities to help their children (Archer and Weir, 2004).
* Reform of school organization to develop a unity of purpose and build on existing strengths of teachers and pupils. The JCSP has a positive impact on student attendance and retention for those pupils at risk of leaving school early. The programme has encouraged teachers to engage with a range of teaching methodologies and the extra resources provided to schools are being used beneficially (D.E.S., 2006). Similar findings have been made in relation to Leaving Certificate Applied (Banks et al., 2010).
* Adequate financial resources. Ireland spends 0.2% of GDP on early childhood care and education compared to an OECD average of 0.4% (NESF, 2005) and 4.7% on education generally compared to an OECD average of 5.7% and an EU19 average of 5.5% (OECD, 2009). More recently, Ireland has spent 6.4% of GDP on education compared to an OECD average of 6.3% but that merely reflects the fact that severe cutbacks in education expenditure since the end of the Celtic Tiger have been slightly less severe than the reduction in DGDP over the same period (OECD, 2013).

Findings from recent DEIS studies were presented at a conference in Marino Institute of Education on May 1st, 2014. At that conference, Susan Weir pointed to:

* The enduring relationship between poverty and educational outcomes.
* High levels of engagement by staff.
* A focus on planning and target setting.
* Improved pupil outcomes.
* Significantly improved pupil attendance.
* Aspirations and expectations of 9 year olds of going to 3rd level has improved.
* The return on DEIS is more likely in the long-term than the short-term.

At the same conference, Peter Archer and Laura McAvinue discussed the findings of research on what have we learned about DEIS in post-primary. Those findings included:

* Principal teachers in DEIS schools are overwhelmingly positive about the planning aspect of DEIS while acknowledging some of the drawbacks and obstacles e.g. time.
* Principal teachers are very positive about DEIS but concerned about resourcing.
* Principal teachers say that DEIS improved retention, achievement and attendance.
* In Junior Certificate English, there is an average of 1 grade point difference between DEIS schools and non DEIS schools. Results in DEIS schools have improved a little more than non-DEIS schools in previous five years. The difference in grades in Junior Certificate Maths was slightly wider in DEIS schools but there is no greater maths improvement in DEIS vis-à-vis non DEIS.
* Retention, to Junior Certificate, in non-DEIS schools is 97% but about four percentage points lower in non-DEIS schools. It is difficult to interpret how much of a difference DEIS is making here.
* Retention to Leaving Cert is 92% in non-DEIS schools and 79% in DEIS schools.
* Academic performance in Leaving Certificate in DEIS schools is rising significantly faster than in non-DEIS schools.

Nicola Tickner, presented findings on the progression of students in DEIS schools. Those findings included:

* There were 55,000 school completers in 2009/2010.
* There were 8,000 early school leavers. 60% went to 3rd Level. 7% to social welfare. 10% to employment. Over 20% to further education.
* Less than 25% of school completers in DEIS schools went to 3rd Level.
* Many more DEIS school completers went to further education than their non-DEIS peers.
* Repeat Leaving Certificate rates were about same for DEIS and non-DEIS school completers.
* 55% of early leavers overall went back to education or on to training within a year.

The above research makes clear that DEIS is working and needs to be continued and funded to a greater degree. Supports must also continue to other initiatives in disadvantaged areas such as the School Completion Programme. All schools need access to comprehensive pastoral structures including career guidance and middle management. It is also clear that significant resources must be invested in further and adult education as this is an important route into and through education for many students especially in areas of educational disadvantage.

The Future:

Downes and Gilligan (2007) have set out a comprehensive roadmap for the future. Amongst their suggestions are:

* Schools reaching out to parents in genuine ways e.g. expansion of the HSCLO scheme which has been shown to generate positive outcomes (Weir and Archer, 2004).
* Greater emphasis on the teaching-learning relationship in mathematics.
* Greater access for maths students to critical reasoning.
* Continuous professional development.
* More learning support in numeracy.
* A comprehensive system of education for 3-5 year olds.
* Adequate funding of the NEWB (attendance improves by 4% in areas where education welfare officers are based). It needs 300 staff but had far less at the time of recent amalgamations of agencies occurring.
* Provide funding for more posts in NEPS (now the Inclusion Support Service).
* Increase co-ordination between primary schools and second levels.
* More pre-service training for teachers going to designated disadvantaged schools.

It is worth noting that some of the above have since been implemented in whole or in part.

At a recent conference in Edinburgh, Pasi Sahlberg from Harvard University suggested that education can enhance equity if the following are supplied:

* Systematic investment in equity
* Fair funding
* Investment in early childhood care and education
* Early identification of special needs

Conclusion:

Educational disadvantage has been a serious problem for some time in Ireland. Existing initiatives have made some in-roads but much more needs to be done. Many studies have mapped the extent of the problem 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, further education, and school level supports. Investment in home school liaison support is also necessary.

**Ends**

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