



## Teachers' Union of Ireland

**Response to Consultation by Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) regarding its consultation process on the next government policy framework for the participation of children and young people in decision making.**

**(December 2022)**

### **Introduction**

The TUI would like to thank DCEDIY for the opportunity to make this submission.

The TUI represents teachers, lecturers and staff (21,000+) in Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools, Youthreach, institutes of technology and technological universities and those working in out of school services.

### **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, Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2018; HEA, 2019; Coolahan, 2017; Eivers, 2019; CSO, 2019a; McKeown et al., 2019; CSO, 2020b; OECD, 2020; Eurofound, 2020; McNamara et al., 2020; Clark & Kavanagh, 2021; OECD, 2021a; CSO, 2021; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021; Indecon, 2020; Purdy et al., 2021; CSO, 2022a; DE,

2021b; Smyth et al., 2022; Gabriel et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2022).

That is despite Ireland spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015b; SJI, 2018, NERI, 2018, OECD, 2019a; UNDP, 2019; OECD, 2021a; Kovacic et al., 2021; CSO, 2022a; Clark et al., 2022) and experiencing historic underinvestment (DES, 2018b). The CSO (2022a) has stated that real expenditure per student in post-primary fell 5.8% between 2008 and 2018, and real expenditure per student in higher education fell 35%. Ireland also has the 8<sup>th</sup> largest class sizes in upper secondary in all of the EU/EFTA and EU candidate countries. In higher education, Ireland has extraordinarily large class sizes by international comparison i.e 23:1 compared to 15:1 (OECD, 2021a). Despite this, citizen satisfaction with the education system in Ireland is the highest of any of 22 European countries studied by Boyle (2018) whilst parent satisfaction with the Irish education system was the second highest out of fifty-six countries in Clerkin et al. (2020).

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 (see also Smyth et al., 2022). 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 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019). ESRI (2020) found very high levels of trust of young people in the Irish education system.

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2019; DCYA, 2020). 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; Government of Ireland, 2019) and rate of natural increase (CSO, 2022c; CSO, 2022d) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future. The DE (2021a) has estimated that the student population in post- primary will rise by approximately seven thousand students per year until reaching a peak enrolment of c.408k in 2024/25. Student numbers in higher education are also projected to rise substantially (DES, 2018d).

In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world- class child-centred society can be achieved with inadequate resources of time or personnel. In terms of overall expenditure on education, Ireland and Greece were the only EU member states in 2015 to spend significantly less than the UN SDG 4 minimum of 4% of GDP on education (UNESCO, 2022). The DES (2018c) has itself acknowledged “historic underinvestment”.

The growing economy (ESRI, 2021; EU Commission, 2021; OECD, 2021b; IBEC, 2021; Central Bank, 2022; IMF, 2021; CSO, 2022b; ESRI, 2022a; ESRI, 2022b) means that Government is in a good position to make a meaningful contribution to continue supporting students with additional needs or from under-represented target groups and/or migrant and refugee communities.

### **Voice of young people**

The TUI believes that it is vitally important to listen to the voices of young people, and it is something which our members do every day. We enjoy a very positive relationship with our colleagues in the ISSU and meet with them frequently. Until its recent closure, the TUI also was a strong contributor to the Youth Connect project in ICTU. The TUI strongly believes that Student Councils make an important contribution to schools. The TUI welcomes the core principles of the School Charter Bill especially since its expanded remit.

### **Core principles of listening to students and young people**

The TUI agrees with the approach outlined by our colleagues in the NASUWT in the United Kingdom. They have done significant work on outlining eight principles that should be followed in the area of listening to young people.

The TUI is clear that students should play an active and constructive role in their own learning, the learning of peers and the development of their school communities. This does, however, need to be balanced with appropriateness and be done in an age-appropriate manner.

Teachers have always sought to ensure that students are able to articulate their views and participate effectively in their learning, as well as the wider life of their school communities.

This has been a long-standing position held even prior to the introduction of the UNCRC and is a fundamental element of teachers' professional practice. It also recognises that teachers' ability to motivate students to learn partly depends on the extent to which students can be supported to engage in and take responsibility for their own learning.

Protecting and enhancing the rights of children and young people to be heard and participate meaningfully in debates that affect their lives is a key duty of the state in a democratic society. It is therefore a particularly important principle in the context of the state's responsibilities for ensuring universal access to a well-funded and high-quality education.

The TUI believes there are eight basic principles that should be reflected in the development of student voice policy and practice at school level to ensure that student voice is effective and supported by the whole school community.

**Principle 1 – Student voice activities should make a positive and demonstrable contribution to the life of the school**

The TUI asserts that student voice is most effective where it encourages students to become involved in projects and activities that enable them to enact genuine change within their schools and local communities. This is also true of change in their communities, or the wider world.

Student voice activities should be viewed a holistic part of learning and developing, rather than simply an exercise which enables a school to comply with external requirements.

Examples of positive and meaningful student voice activities could therefore include:

- redeveloping school uniforms;
- setting up and running sustainable development initiatives;
- designation and redevelopment of physical equipment or recreational areas;

- involvement in community projects such as working with charities or organisations that support the most vulnerable in society;
- developing and maintaining global links.

Activities such as these enable students to take responsibility for their learning while developing important skills such as problem solving, negotiating, fundraising and project management. Through these initiatives, students recognise the symbiotic relationship between the rights they can exercise and the responsibilities that they have.

Where student voice activities allow students to see the positive impact of their actions, this links to the TUI's long-standing view that effective curriculum, which includes student voice activities, should start from the needs of the child. It should address both their learning and development needs, and also be designed to give them a sense of their own agency.

Student voice activities that make a demonstrable contribution to the life of the school also help learners to become confident and equips them to make a positive contribution to society.

**Principle 2 – Student voice activities must not undermine teachers' professional authority and must not compromise other fundamental rights of children and young people**

The TUI indisputably recognises the absolute right of all children and young people, set out in Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC, to access educational provision that develops their personalities, talents, and mental and physical abilities to the fullest possible extent.

Securing this universal entitlement creates complex and wide-ranging responsibilities for schools. If students' educational rights and entitlements under the UNCRC are to be upheld in practice, the ways in which relationships between teachers and students are established and sustained are of critical importance. Parents have a role to play in re-affirming to students the issues which schools can, and can't, address within their remit and resources.

Student voice and student participation must not impact on the ability of teachers and principal teachers to discharge their responsibilities to secure the rights of students to a high-quality education. This aligns with the requirements set out in Article 3 of the UNCRC, that ‘in all actions concerning children...the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration’.

Taking this into account, a key measure to assess the appropriateness and acceptability of any student voice initiative involves consideration of the extent to which teachers’ professional authority is supported or, inversely, undermined. Time needs to be available to teachers to avail of CPD opportunities that are useful, respectful of their role and experience, and also provided within school time to allow as many teachers as possible to access the CPD.

Any student voice practice that is used to make judgements about a teacher’s professionalism has the potential to undermine teachers’ professional authority and is therefore wholly unacceptable.

The TUI has received examples of schools using student voice to question teachers’ capabilities. Not only is this unacceptable employment practice, it is likely to create suspicion and resistance and undermine any benefits of student voice.

**Principle 3 – Student voice and respect of the UNCRC is not and must never be mutually exclusive from a school’s ability to secure and maintain positive student behaviour**

The authority of teachers is important for the purpose of securing education and well being and that of other students in the school. Teachers and school leaders need to be trusted to do their job in a professional manner, within the limits of resources and legislation.

This view of authority is consistent with purposeful approaches to student voice and student participation that ensures the views and opinions of all students are heard and taken account of in decisions that affect their lives in schools, including their own and other students’ behaviour.

The TUI asserts that teachers cannot teach and students cannot learn in an environment where there is disruption and violence. Being in this environment will diminish a student's right to a high-quality education and one which allows them to develop to their full potential, as set out in Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC.

**Principle 4 – Student voice activities should be part of a system that values and respects the views of all members of the school community, including staff**

Student voice can and should be an effective method of gathering feedback from students, including identifying their concerns and interests. Carried out correctly, it should offer opportunities for students to feel they are able to engage with and influence developments within their school and the wider school community.

Student voice must be part of a whole-school approach that values and encourages the contributions of all members of the school community, including teachers. The TUI believes that student voice can only be effective if a school develops and embeds mechanisms for ensuring all members of the school community are able to express their views and ideas. This has to be within an open and positive environment that welcomes constructive feedback.

While student voice activities should help a school to take better account of student views, the TUI has evidence of this feedback then being used to make judgements about the quality of teaching. This is a clear abuse of both staff and student trust. It highlights the need for schools to ensure that the relationship between the senior management team and the structures and activities to promote student participation is robust, clearly planned and transparent.

**Principle 5 – Policies and practices on student voice must reflect the capacity of students to participate in particular activities and the extent to which they can reasonably be held to account for the results of their actions**

Students should be encouraged to explore, develop and participate in school life as well as in the life of the wider school community. Students who share a strong and positive affinity with

their school are likely to be better motivated to learn. For example, students may be encouraged to take on responsibilities such as being a school prefect or monitor.

While schools will want to encourage students to take greater ownership and responsibility for aspects of school life, there are a number of school-level roles, responsibilities and tasks that should not be undertaken by students. Article 12 of the UNCRC implies that students should not undertake activities that require professional skills and expertise. These should only be undertaken by qualified and skilled persons who are accountable for their decisions and actions through their status as employees. To apply this principle, a judgement has to be made about whether a specific activity or responsibility can be allocated to students. While this may require assessment of the factors relating to a specific case, the description of typical student voice activities explored later in this guidance may be applied to form a judgement about the appropriateness or otherwise of a particular practice.

**Principle 6 – Student voice activities and policies must be consistent with, and support work to promote, equality and diversity, while tackling discrimination and prejudice**

Schools have a duty to promote equality. Tackling discrimination and prejudice, promoting equality and fostering good relations should therefore be embedded within all aspects of school life. This includes activities related to student participation and student voice. It is vital that approaches to student voice recognise and progress equality and inclusion in schools.

The TUI believes there must be an explicit expectation within school-level approaches to student voice and student participation that the expression of prejudiced or discriminatory views and opinions by students is neither acceptable nor tolerable and will be tackled proactively. Not only is this ethically, morally and legally correct, Articles 13 and 14 of the UNCRC infer that a child's right to freedom of expression and freedom of thought, conscience and religion is subject to limitations prescribed by law to respect the rights of others. The TUI cannot, support activities that purport to advance student voice but are potentially discriminatory.

There are many examples where student voice and equality policies work in synchronicity,



with activities being used to challenge prejudice-related bullying and promote equality and diversity. These have included being alert in reporting incidents, peer mentoring, community action projects, and activities that foster a sense of teamwork and promote shared identity.

**Principle 7 – Approaches to student voice must be inclusive and give all students an opportunity to participate**

Student voice should enable students to respond to issues that can affect all students. It should also provide opportunities for students to take responsibility for themselves and others, develop an understanding of the relationship between rights and responsibilities, and develop appropriate and relevant skills in representing, negotiating and developing.

The TUI believes that all students should be encouraged to develop these skills as part of accessing a broad and balanced curriculum. Therefore, schools should develop strategies to encourage all students, and not just a select few, to become involved in student voice activities.

Research has identified the risk of poor practice where views that claim to be representative of the student population as a whole are, in effect, merely those expressed by a limited group of students who are willing or selected to engage in certain forms of student voice activity. Such practice has the potential to be divisive and, in some instances, may lead to students becoming disengaged from learning or participating constructively in the wider life of the school.

**Principle 8 – Student voice activities must not add to teacher and principal teacher workload or school-level bureaucratic burdens**

Approaches to student voice and student participation must not conflict with or work against efforts to address excessive teacher and principal teacher workload and working hours. Where student voice policies are developed appropriately, they should contribute towards reducing bureaucratic burdens on teachers and principal teachers and free them to focus on teaching and leading and managing teaching and learning.

Practices that are inconsistent with this key principle undermine the working conditions of teachers and school leaders. This threatens the provision of high-quality learning experiences for students given the distraction they can create from teachers' and school leaders' core responsibilities.

Schools can utilise the services of outside organisations to support student voice activities. External expertise can enrich the quality of student participation while helping to ensure teachers and school leaders are able to concentrate on their core responsibilities.

### **Child and Youth Centred**

The TUI welcomes the child and youth centred approach demonstrated by the establishment and ongoing work of the DCEDIY. The mission of the DCEDIY “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 totally inadequate to meet the level of need so it is vital that the new strategy not be funded ‘within existing (inadequate) resources’. Additional funding is essential.

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 over 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.

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 DCEDIY 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 DCEDIY 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 says a lot about us as a society. 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 significantly since 2008 (Smyth et al., 2015) though it must also be recognised that the budget for SCP has increased since (see for example the Government budget for 2023). 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 DCEDIY 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.

### **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.

## **Impact of Covid-19**

It would be remiss of us not to mention the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mental health for both staff and students in the education system. Despite the fact that the pandemic started over two years ago, it is unlikely that we have yet experienced the full impact of the pandemic on mental health. However, we can perhaps draw some preliminary conclusions. Both Collie (2021) and Burke and Arslie (2020) have reported on the increased levels of occupational stress experienced during this period. Evans et al. (2020) have reported on the impact of the shutdowns and shortages on families. Waters et al. (2021: 2) have reported eloquently on the many ways families have been affected:

*“including higher levels of divorce (Global Times, 2020), more intimate partner violence (Hamadani et al., 2020), increased conflict and negative family expectations (Günther-Bel et al., 2020), parental pressure (S. M. Brown et al., in press), as well as undesirable changes in family routines (e.g., dietary habits, physical activity, screen time, sleeping patterns; Allabadi et al., 2020). The negative experiences stemming from COVID-19 are markedly worse for disadvantaged families who are living in smaller, poorer-quality dwellings, have less access to vital services and resources, and are more likely to have to work in-person and, thus, have an increased risk of virus contraction (Owusu & Frimpong-Manso, 2020; Wilke et al., 2020).”*

Waters et al. (2021) have gone on to describe the enormous impact on mental health that the pandemic has had on educational institutions and their students:

*“Schools have also suffered via widespread shutdowns, with up to 91% of the students across globe experiencing remote learning on account of country-wide school closures in 2020 (UNESCO, 2021). Research shows that for many students, the move to remote learning has increased student loneliness (Loades et al., 2020), decreased student wellbeing (Nanigopal et al., 2020), and has harmed learning effectiveness (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020; Di Pietro et*

*al., 2020). The negative effect of school closures is amplified for students who were already experiencing intersecting vulnerabilities (e.g., war, displacement, poverty, and weak healthcare and education systems; Banati et al., 2020). Those who live in marginalized communities or are economically disadvantaged are also at greater risk for negative outcomes due to the 'digital divide' (Eyles et al., 2020) and other factors, such as having no dedicated study space at home or having parents who are more likely to need to travel to work and are more at risk of contracting the virus (Andrews et al., 2020).*

*At the same time that students are struggling, the rapid move to remote learning has increased the workload and stress of teachers, school staff, and leaders/ administrators (Alves et al., in press; Suryaman et al., 2020) and has put pressure on parents trying to help their children with learning while also working from home (Ahrendt et al., 2020; Fontanesi et al., 2020)."*

To compound matters further, research has shown that the burden of difficulties arising from Covid-19 has fallen disproportionately on SEN and disadvantaged student communities (Holt-White et al., 2022; Darmody et al., 2020; SJI, 2021; EEF, 2022). It must also be borne in mind that mental health difficulties were, even before Covid, more likely to occur in students from disadvantaged communities (Kim and Hagquist, 2018; Danielson et al., 2020), and in students with SEN (Mental Health Foundation, 2016; Cree et al., 2020) than in their peers who do not have SEN and don't come from disadvantaged communities.

## **Recommendations**

The TUI would like to make the following recommendations:

- The voices of children and young people should be listened to in appropriate fora.
- Substantial investment is needed in the education system in order to fulfil the promise of young people. This needs to include restoration of middle management and pastoral posts.
- DCEDIY should adopt the eight principles outlined by the TUI.
- Policy making should be child and youth centred.
- Young people experiencing personal or health difficulties should be able to access out-of-school supports in a timely manner.

- Children should not be living in consistent poverty.
- Additional resources should be provided to the National Vetting Bureau.
- Additional investment is needed in youth services.
- The impact, socially and psychologically, of Covid-19 should be factored into Government decision-making over future years.

**Ends**

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## Glossary

C&C	Community and Comprehensive
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs (Now DCEDIY)
DE	Department of Education (Now DoE)
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills (Now DoE)
DoE	Department of Education
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
ERC	Educational Research Centre
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HSE	Health Service Executive
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISSU	Irish Second Level Students' Union



NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NASUWT	National Association of School Masters and Union of Women Teachers
NERI	Nevin Economic Research Institute
NYCI	National Youth Council Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SCP	School Completion Programme
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SJI	Social Justice Ireland
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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