

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI) response to the call for submissions by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) on the topic of out of school education provision.**

**(March 2018)**

# The TUI represents teachers, lecturers and staff in out of school services (18,000+) employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools, Youthreach and institutes of technology. Close examination of all relevant data indicates that schools in the ETB and C&C sectors enrol, by far, the largest proportion of students with special needs and coming from areas of educational and economic disadvantage.

**Background**

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018; OECD, 2009; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nOg, 2017, Growing Up in Ireland, 2017, IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017) despite spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015).

The key causes of early school leaving are economic and educational disadvantage in families, special educational needs in children and the absence of adequate educational support structures. This submission will deal with those issues in detail below but it is important to note that “the latest available EU figures showed that in 2016 11% of all 18 to 24-year olds in the EU28 member states were classified as early school leavers. The Irish equivalent rate was 6% in the same period. This ranked the country seventh lowest among EU member states” (CSO, 2018a: 5). The Department of Education and Skills also calculates the early school leaver rate in Ireland as being significantly lower than peer countries (DES, 2017a). In fact, in 2015, people in Ireland aged 15-64 were 1.48 times more likely to have a degree than to be educated only to lower secondary level or below (CSO, 2018b). Early school leavers are three to four times more likely to be unemployed than those who complete upper secondary school (Irish Times May 13th, 2009). This has implications for private and national income.

**Supports Available Currently**

Vital responses to the issue of early school leaving have been the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, the Youthreach programme, the School Completion Programme and the DEIS programme. Evidence has shown that these programmes work very well in preventing early school leaving and supporting those students who do leave school early. For example, Archer and Shortt (2003: 82) found an “overwhelming positive” perception of the programme despite the programme only costing €122.03 per targeted family in 2001. Presentations in 2014, cited later in this submission, by staff from the Educational Research Centre make clear that the DEIS programme is succeeding. It is most unfortunate that there have been savage cuts to the School Completion Programme and the DEIS programme recently. Those cuts amount to 10% in DEIS since 2008 (parliamentary question March 1st, 2017) and a 6% cut in the allocation to the School Completion Programme in each of the years 2012, 2013 and 2014 (TUI, 2016). Those cuts are impossible to justify in the context of the success of the School Completion Programme as highlighted in Smyth et al. (2015). It is also deeply regrettable that full restoration of the six hundred posts in ex-quota guidance removed in 2012 has still not happened. A further one hundred and fifty posts were also recently lost from the guidance enhancement initiative which started approximately fifteen years ago. One of the three principles of the guidance enhancement initiative was to prevent early school leaving. Guidance counsellors are a crucial support to students at risk of ‘dropping out of school’ (IGC, 2018).

It is 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 May 2015 conference in Edinburgh, 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).”

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 (2012, 2017b) suggests that the number of students in the primary school system will rise by forty-nine thousand (516,460 to 565,696) between 2011 and 2019 and by almost one hundred thousand in second level between 2011 and 2025 (322,528 to 416,897). In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world-class out of school support system can be sustained with inadequate resources of time, money or personnel. For example, NCSE (2014), Barnardos (2008) and Growing Up in Scotland (2012) all show that between a quarter and a fifth of all students in the school system have special needs. Students with special needs are at greater risk of school drop-out (America’s Promise Alliance, 2015).

A commitment to implementing the EPSEN Act 2004 is essential if provision for students with special educational needs is to be adequately and appropriately addressed. However, full implementation will only be possible when sufficient resources are allocated toprimary and post-primary schools. Over ten years ago, TUI (2006) emphasised that schools were not sufficiently resourced to implement specific elements of the EPSEN Act, in particular designing and delivering Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for SEN students. In the absence of adequate resourcing, many of the needs of students with special educational needs are falling on parents, as seen in Scotland. Failure to meet the needs of children can, as noted by the charity Action for Sick Children Scotland, result in students missing up to a year in school (Times Education Supplement Scotland, August 18th, 2017).

The cutbacks in educational supports outlined above are compounded for students with special educational needs as they also rely heavily on support services from the health sector. Many of these support services are vital if a student with special needs 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). 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 a reasonable rate of 2500 students per psychologist, taking into account demographic group, would require the employment of 267 more psychologists by 2021 (Impact, 2015). 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). 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). Many of the above difficulties also arise when 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. It is interesting to note that Finnish schools have access to a school psychologist, school social worker, study counsellor, school dentist, school nurse, speech therapist and family counsellor. All of these specialists are either based in one school or, in areas where schools are smaller (over 30 percent of Finnish schools have only three or four permanent teachers), they split their time between several schools. “The multi-disciplinary group known as the child welfare team is a cornerstone of Finnish education, and it is a legal requirement to have one in every school. In big schools, this group must meet weekly for a two-hour meeting.” (Crehan, 2016: 28)

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 have access to adequate financial resources. Ireland spends 4.8% of GDP on education generally compared to an OECD average of 5.2% (OECD, 2017).

Findings from recent DEIS studies were presented at a conference in Marino Institute of Education on May 1st, 2017. 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 Youthreach programme is also an essential part of the out of school support system. Youthreach was launched jointly by the Ministers for Education and Labour in October, 1988. It was envisaged that it would be a two-year programme of education, training and work experience for unqualified early school leavers in the 15-18 years age group. The programme was an inter-departmental initiative of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Youthreach centres are managed by the Education and Training Boards.

Youthreach was introduced initially as a temporary, experimental programme, and this status was reflected in the original staffing arrangements which were also temporary and short-term. However, by 1996, there were 57 centres in operation, and it was evident that there was a strong demand for the service. By 2017, there are in excess of 100 Youthreach centres around the country. It is also important to note that Youthreach centres now have a statutory footing having been designated as Centres for Education in September, 2004, under the Education Act, 1998.

The overall purpose of Youthreach is ‘to provide participants with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to successfully make the transition to work and adult life.’ The Department of Education and Skills lists the following objectives for Youthreach on its web-site:

• Personal and social development and increased self-esteem

• Second-chance/alternative education and introductory level training

• Promoting independence, personal autonomy and a pattern of lifelong learning

• Integration into further education and training opportunities and the labour market

• Certification relative to ability and career options

• Social inclusion.

These objectives are broadly consistent with those of second-chance/alternative education programmes elsewhere in the EU. The goal is to offer early school leavers who do not fit into the highly structured, mainstream school environment an opportunity to obtain an education and qualifications in an alternative environment. The Youthreach programme is provided in ‘out-of-school’ settings given that the majority of Youthreach students have been alienated from mainstream schools. It is the unambiguous position of the TUI that these goals require that the state, the Department of Education and Skills and SOLAS, and we as society, view the student body in Youthreach as educable to the same high standards that are prevalent in all post-primary schools and that educational opportunity, in terms both of curriculum and opportunity to progress, must be provided to learners in Youthreach settings.

Research has shown that the Youthreach programme is very successful in supporting students who have left school early. In Youthreach the young people can continue to access quality educational provision and continue to pursue respected educational qualifications. “There are 103 ETB Youthreach centres located around the country, mostly in disadvantaged areas…The pedagogical approach of Youthreach is more closely aligned to adult education than mainstream schooling.” (McHugh, 2015: 62)

As noted by the DES (2010: 37)

“Since its establishment in the 1980s, Youthreach has been a very important element of the

education system, catering for students who leave school early, and it now caters for close to

6,000 learners in VEC Youthreach and FÁS Community Training Centres (CTCs) nationally.

A considerable proportion of the learners in Youthreach have significant literacy and

numeracy difficulties. A recent evaluation by the Inspectorate of education provision in

Youthreach centres found that one of the greatest challenges facing Youthreach was the

development of the learners’ literacy and numeracy skills, and that provision for literacy and

numeracy required a higher level of professional underpinning and greater targeting of the

needs of individual learners.”

**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 (Archer and Weir, 2004).
* Continuous professional development.
* More learning support in numeracy.
* A comprehensive system of education for 3-5-year olds.
* Adequate funding of the NEWB, now part of TUSLA, (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 part of the Inclusion Support Service).
* Increase co-ordination between primary schools and second levels.

It is worth noting that some of the above have since been implemented in whole or in part. However, as outlined above, funding for TUSLA and the Psychological Service continues to be woefully inadequate.

**Conclusion**

Existing out of school support systems such as SCP and Youthreach, together with in-school support structures such as guidance services, HSCL and DEIS supports have contributed significantly to Ireland having an extraordinarily low level of early school leaving. However, as the economy continues to grow (ESRI, 2017; IMF, 2017; EU Commission 2017) it is likely that increased employment opportunities for young people will create a ‘pull factor’ away from full-time education. Hence, it is essential that the DES invests vigorously in the services needed to prevent early school leaving and to support young people who have left the mainstream education system already.

Ends

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**Glossary**

C&C Community and Comprehensive

DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES Department of Education and Skills

ETB Education and Training Board

EU European Union

EPSEN Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004

GCSE General Certificate of Secondary Education

NEWB National Education Welfare Board (now part of TUSLA)

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

SCP School Completion Programme

SEN Special Educational Need

TUI Teachers’ Union of Ireland

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