EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHALLENGES, SUCCESSES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE DEIS PROGRAMME

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Executive Summary

This research, commissioned by the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), examines teacher and school leadership perceptions of the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme and its supports for both educators and students. Conducted by TASC (Think-tank for Action on Social Change), the study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from surveys of 227 teachers and 49 school leaders with qualitative insights from four teacher focus groups and five in-depth interviews with school management. National data and a review of relevant literature were also included to provide further context.

The DEIS programme, a central component of Ireland's efforts to address educational disadvantage, has led to notable improvements in outcomes for students from underserved communities. For example, gaps in senior cycle retention between DEIS and non-DEIS schools have significantly narrowed[1], and higher education progression rates for DEIS students rose from 45% in 2012 to 60% in 2022.[2] These advancements underscore the programme's role in fostering greater social mobility and reducing educational disparities.

Despite these successes, the research also identifies a series of challenges within the programme's implementation. Key concerns raised by respondents include a lack of transparency in resource allocation, inadequate classroom facilities, and a lingering stigma associated with DEIS schools. Teachers reported experiencing heavy workloads due to diverse classroom needs and significant administrative burdens. Furthermore, the research revealed disparities between DEIS schools, depending on location, size, and student composition. While many teachers expressed a sense of fulfilment in their roles, particularly in supporting students, they also highlighted the need for systemic reforms. These reforms include enhanced social, behavioural and mental health supports, and a more transparent and equitable distribution of resources to ensure that the most disadvantaged schools receive the support they need to continue driving equity.

This report presents a comprehensive examination of these findings and outlines several recommendations aimed at addressing the identified challenges, with a focus on improving support for both teachers and students within the DEIS framework. This report was written and prepared by Dr Sara Singleton with support from Eva Layte

Summary of Key Findings

1. **Job Satisfaction**

   o Teachers in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools reported similar levels of job satisfaction with more variance between teachers in DEIS schools. Many DEIS teachers found their roles personally rewarding, particularly when supporting vulnerable students. However, the demands of managing behavioural issues and fulfilling additional responsibilities in disadvantaged settings significantly impacted their emotional well-being.

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1   Department of Education. (2024). Retention rates of pupils in second-level schools. data.gov.ie. Retrieved January 03, 2025, from https://data.gov.ie/dataset/eda18-retention-rates-of-pupils-in-second-level-schools

2   Higher Education Authority. (2022). Access to Higher Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/

2. **Class Sizes**

   o Over half (**57%**) of teachers in DEIS school and (**53%**) of teachers in non-DEIS schools reported feeling that student-to-teacher ratios were too high. Despite the programme's stated commitment to smaller classes, actual class sizes (20–25 students) in the DEIS schools surveyed frequently matched those in non-DEIS schools.

3. **Classroom Facilities and Resources**

   o Poor infrastructure was a recurring theme.

      ▪ **10%** of teachers in DEIS schools rated their classroom facilities as "very poor," compared to just **2.8%** of teachers in non-DEIS.

      ▪ Science labs and sports facilities were particular areas of concern, with **32.5%** of teachers in DEIS schools rating them as "poor" or "very poor."

4. **Higher and Further Education Participation**

   o **61.8%** of teachers in DEIS schools agreed that the programme improved access to higher education, while **73.2%** saw enhanced access to further education.

   o However, teachers felt that inconsistent supports for students transitioning to higher and further education, especially when compared to the level of support received by many when in school, may be contributing to dropout rates.

5. **Stigma**

   o Persistent stigma around DEIS schools was identified as a major issue. Negative stereotypes – such as assumptions that students are "low-achieving" or "non-academic" – undermine student confidence and diminish the professional standing of teachers.

6. **Workload and Administrative Burden**

   o Teachers in DEIS schools described disproportionately heavy workloads, driven by:

      ▪ Diverse student needs.

      ▪ Behavioural challenges.

      ▪ Excessive administrative tasks.

   o Many viewed DEIS planning processes as overly complex and time-consuming.

7. **Professional Development (CPD)**

   o Teachers in DEIS and non-DEIS schools were dissatisfied with available CPD opportunities, citing:

- A lack of relevance to their specific challenges.

- Difficulties attending training during term time due to competing responsibilities.

8. **Non-DEIS Perspectives**

  o Teachers and school management in non-DEIS schools expressed a desire for DEIS-style supports, such as Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) services, to support disadvantaged students.

  o DEIS teachers, however, cautioned against diluting resources for the most disadvantaged schools by overextending the programme.

Summary Recommendations

1. **Enhance Awareness of Resources**

  o **Department of Education (DoE):** Increase transparency by publishing accessible information on DEIS supports, resource allocation, and plans at local and national levels.

  o **TUI:** Inform members about any updates to DEIS supports and strategies for effective implementation.

2. **Provide Planning Support through OIDE Facilitators**

  o **DoE & OIDE:** Deploy facilitators to assist schools with DEIS planning, simplify administrative processes, and share best practices.

3. **Implement Needs-Based and Transparent Funding**

  o **DoE:** Introduce a tiered funding model to match resources to specific school needs, allowing for greater local autonomy.

4. **Ensure Compliance with Student-to-Teacher Ratios**

  o **DoE:** Prioritise resources to achieve smaller class sizes in DEIS schools, especially in those with the highest levels of disadvantage.

5. **Improve Professional Development (CPD)**

  o **DoE:** Incentivise CPD participation, provide training during non-teaching periods, and offer modules tailored to the unique challenges faced by DEIS teachers.

  o **TUI:** Advocate for dedicated time within school schedules for CPD engagement.

6. **Expand Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Services**

  o **DoE:** Extend HSCL services to more schools with high levels of disadvantage and work to support better transitions to further education.

7. **Combat DEIS Stigma**

   o **DoE:** Launch public campaigns celebrating the achievements of DEIS schools, students, and teachers.

   o **TUI:** Advocate for recognition of the contribution of teachers in DEIS schools.

8. **Reduce Administrative Burdens**

   o **DoE:** Streamline DEIS planning and reporting processes and provide administrative support to reduce teacher workloads.

9. **Increase Leadership Capacity**

   o **DoE:** Develop leadership training and mentorship opportunities and create additional leadership roles for DEIS schools with complex needs.

10. **Conduct Further Research**

   o **Higher Education Authority (HEA) & DoE:** Explore stigma-related issues, evaluate DEIS programme outcomes, and assess links between CPD, teacher satisfaction, and student performance.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows: Section 1 reviews literature and data on Ireland's educational performance, highlighting government initiatives that have improved outcomes for disadvantaged students. This section also discusses how, despite these advancements, inequalities persist. Section 2 outlines the methodology used in the study. Section 3 presents key findings from surveys, interviews, and focus groups, divided into several subsections: 3.1 discusses the perceived effectiveness of specific DEIS supports according to TUI members, 3.2 addresses job satisfaction, 3.3 highlights the perceived advantages of the DEIS programme for both students and teachers, 3.4 explores its perceived disadvantages, and 3.5 outlines suggestions from TUI members for the upcoming DEIS review. Section 4 presents recommendations, and Section 5 concludes the report.

1. Introduction and Context

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1.1 Ireland's educational achievements

Ireland's education system is internationally recognised for its high performance, consistently ranking above the OECD average in reading, mathematics, and science, despite limited funding and historic underinvestment. Ireland's education spending appears low when measured as a percentage of GDP, however, this is misleading due to Ireland's inflated GDP figures.[3] When adjusted to Modified Gross National Income (GNI*), Ireland's education expenditure improves significantly. Based on GNI*, Ireland ranks 11th out of 36 OECD countries in overall spending from primary to tertiary education, with particularly strong investment in primary education, where it ranks 6th. However, secondary and tertiary education spending remains lower, placing 23rd and 19th, respectively[4].

Irish students excel in international assessments, according to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Irish 15-year-olds rank second out of 81 countries in reading, maths, and science, performing well above the OECD average[5]. At the tertiary level, Ireland leads the EU, with 62.3% of 25–34-year-olds holding a degree in 2022[6]. Tertiary enrolment among 20-year-olds is also high at 59%, ranking third in the EU, significantly above the EU average of 44%[7]. Additionally, Ireland excels in secondary school completion, with 95% of 20–24 and 25–34-year-olds having completed secondary education, compared to EU averages of 84% and 85%, respectively. Early school leaving rates are among the lowest in the EU at just 4%, less than half the EU average of 9.5%[8].

Many of Ireland's educational achievements can be attributed to targeted government interventions aimed at reducing inequality and improving access. By focusing on addressing the needs of disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, these initiatives have helped bridge educational gaps and foster greater inclusion across all levels of education. The Irish government has initiated several interventions with the aim of promoting equity and accessibility in education. Key initiatives include the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, which addresses educational disadvantage at primary and secondary levels. The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) support underrepresented and disadvantaged students in higher education. Additionally, SUSI grants provide financial assistance to students pursuing further and higher education. These programmes have had a significant impact and are a testament to the potential of targeted government interventions to address inequality. A commitment to address these inequities in third-level education is reflected in initiatives such as the National Access Plan 2022-2028, which aims to enhance access, participation, and success in higher education for underrepresented groups. This plan includes measures such as the Student Assistance Fund and the Fund for Students with Disabilities, which provide critical financial support

3   TASC. (2024). The state we are in: Inequality Report 2024. TASC. https://www.tasc.ie/publications/the-state-we-are-in-2024/

4   OECD (2023). Education at a glance 2023: OECD indicators. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en

5   OECD (2023). PISA 2022 results (Volume I and II): Country notes — Ireland. OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/ireland_01173012-en.html

6   Eurostat. (2022). Tertiary education statistics [Data set]. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Tertiary_education_statistics

7   Eurostat. (2024). At least upper secondary educational attainment, age group 25–64 by sex [Data set]. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00065/default/table?lang=en

8   Eurostat. (2023). Early leavers from education and training [Data set]. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_04_10/default/table?lang=en

to students in need.[9] By addressing both the financial and non-financial barriers, these programmes seek to create a more inclusive higher education environment, thereby improving student retention and success rates.[10]

1.2 DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme

The DEIS programme is an initiative in Ireland aimed at addressing educational disadvantage and promoting equality within the school system. Launched by the Department of Education and Skills in 2005, DEIS provides a framework for resources and supports specifically targeted at schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities. The initiative is part of a broader effort to ensure that all children, regardless of their background, have access to quality education.[11] In March 2022, the Minister for Education announced a significant expansion of the DEIS programme, adding 310 schools (273 primary and 37 post-primary) to the scheme. This expansion aimed to benefit an additional 60,000 students, bringing the total number of students supported by DEIS to over 240,000. As a result, approximately 25% of primary and post-primary schools in Ireland now participate in the DEIS programme.[12]

For teachers, DEIS offers extensive support and resources designed to enhance teaching and learning experiences. These include professional development opportunities, additional teaching staff, and the implementation of various literacy and numeracy programmes[13]. Teachers in DEIS schools receive specific training to help them address the unique challenges faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, the programme includes measures to improve school leadership and management, aiming to foster a more supportive and effective educational environment[14].

Students in DEIS schools benefit from a range of supports aimed at improving their educational outcomes and overall well-being. The programme includes initiatives such as breakfast clubs, homework clubs, and after-school activities, which aim to support academic learning and promote social and emotional development.[15] DEIS also provides additional funding for learning materials and classroom resources. Furthermore, there are initiatives focused on parental involvement and community engagement, recognising the crucial role that families and local communities play in a child's education.[16]

9   Higher Education Authority. "National Access Plan 2022-2028." Dublin: Higher Education Authority, 2022. Available at: https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/access-policy/national-access-plan-2022-2028/

10   DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Plan 2017," Department of Education and Skills, https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/DEIS-Plan-2017.pdf

11   DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Plan 2017," Department of Education and Skills, https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/DEIS-Plan-2017.pdf

12   OECD (2024). *OECD review of resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage in Ireland*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/3433784c-en

13   Department of Education and Skills. "Professional Development for Teachers in DEIS Schools." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://oide.ie/primary/home/inclusive-education/deis-social-inclusion/.

14   Department of Education and Skills. *DEIS Action Planning: The quality of leadership and management; teaching, learning and professional development*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, 2022. Accessed June 12, 2024 https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ba007-looking-at-deis-action-planning-for-improvement-in-primary-and-post-primary-schools/

15   Department of Education and Skills. "Supports for Students in DEIS Schools." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/#supports-to-deis-schools

16   Byrne, D. (2019). Parental involvement in Ireland. *Parental Involvement Across European Education Systems: Critical Perspectives*, 49.

The achievements of the DEIS programme are significant. Since its inception in 2005, DEIS has contributed to noticeable improvements in literacy and numeracy levels among participating students. For instance, the percentage of DEIS primary school students achieving the highest levels in reading increased by 13% and in maths by 15% between 2007 and 2022.[17] Research indicates that the gap in educational attainment between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has narrowed, demonstrating the programme's impact on reducing educational inequality. Specifically, the gap in Junior Certificate retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools decreased from 16.8% in 2001 to 8.5% in 2014, and further improvements have been noted up to 2022.[18] Additionally, DEIS has been credited with enhancing student retention rates and increasing the number of students progressing to further education and training. Notably, the percentage of students from DEIS schools transitioning to higher education rose from 45% in 2012 to 60% in 2022.[19]

The 2024 *OECD Review of resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage in Ireland* examined resource allocation to support students at risk of educational disadvantage, focusing on both DEIS and non-DEIS schools. The report highlights Ireland's strong performance in educational equity but notes persistent gaps for disadvantaged students, including Traveller and Roma populations. Key recommendations include improving coordination across departments, refining resource allocation indicators, addressing staff shortages, enhancing school-level interventions, and strengthening monitoring and evaluation through better data integration. The review aims to assist Ireland in advancing equitable education and provide insights for other countries.[20]

1.3 Supports for students in higher and further education

Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE)
HEAR and DARE are initiatives designed to support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and students with disabilities, respectively, in accessing third-level education. HEAR and DARE students have access to a range of supports at third-level, aimed at facilitating their academic success and overall well-being. These supports include academic guidance and mentoring programmes, financial assistance, disability support services, counselling services, and assistive technology resources.[21,22] Research indicates that such supports play a crucial role in mitigating barriers to education and enhancing the retention and progression rates of HEAR and DARE students in higher education institutions.[23] The availability of dedicated support staff, such as HEAR and DARE coordinators, within higher education institutions ensures that students receive personalised assistance and advocacy throughout their academic journey. These coordinators facilitate the transition of HEAR and DARE students into third-level education, provide ongoing support and guidance, and liaise with relevant stakeholders to address any barriers or challenges faced by students. The 2023 Irish Universities Association (IUA) report highlights that nearly 1 in 5 students applying to CAO were assessed for DARE and HEAR eligibility, with 13,650 offers made across the sector.[24]

17   Department of Education. "2022 Annual Report." Dublin: Department of Education, 2022. https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/department-of-education-and-skills-annual-reports/.

18   Educational Research Centre. A Report on the Evaluation of DEIS at Second Level. Dublin: Educational Research Centre, 2014. Retrieved from https://www.erc.ie/documents/deisevaluation_secondlevel_report2014.pdf

19   Higher Education Authority. (2022). Access to Higher Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/

20   OECD (2024).

21   Access College. "Higher Education Access Route (HEAR)." Available at: https://accesscollege.ie/hear/

22   Access College. "Disability Access Route to Education (DARE)." Available at: https://accesscollege.ie/dare/

23   Irish Universities Association. "HEAR and DARE Summary Report 2023." Available at: https://www.iua.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/DARE-HEAR-Summary-Report-2023.pdf

24   Higher Education Authority. (2023). Access to Higher Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/

Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH)

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) in Ireland, initiated by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), aims to improve access to tertiary education for underrepresented groups. PATH offers financial aid, outreach efforts, and academic support to eligible candidates . Since its inception in 2017, PATH has increased enrolment of socio-economically disadvantaged students and improved retention rates within higher education institutions (HEIs). Since the launch of the PATH programme, there has been a 20% rise in the enrolment of students from underrepresented backgrounds in HEIs. Retention rates for these students have improved by approximately 15% over the same period. These figures demonstrate the tangible impact of PATH in facilitating access to higher education and fostering inclusivity within the sector. Overall, PATH demonstrates the effectiveness of targeted interventions in promoting equitable access to higher education. Continued investment and collaboration are essential for further advancing inclusivity in the Irish higher education landscape. Since the launch of the PATH programme in 2017, there has been a 20% rise in the enrolment of students from underrepresented backgrounds in HEIs. Retention rates for these students have improved by approximately 15% over the same period. These figures demonstrate the tangible impact of PATH in facilitating access to higher education and fostering inclusivity within the sector.

Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) Grants

The SUSI grant system aims to enhance educational accessibility and equity by providing financial support to eligible students pursuing further and higher education.[25][26] The primary goal of the SUSI grant system is to alleviate financial barriers that may prevent students from accessing higher education. This objective is reflected in the means-tested nature of the grants, which ensures that support is directed towards those from lower-income families. This targeted approach demonstrates the grant system's role in promoting social equity by enabling students from disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue higher education[27]. SUSI grants have had broader impact across different types of educational institutions, particularly benefiting those in more vocational and technical fields[28]. By reducing financial stress and enabling greater focus on academic pursuits, SUSI grants have played a pivotal role in increasing participation in third-level education.[29]

1.4 Remaining inequality

While Ireland's educational outcomes are impressive across various metrics, significant inequality persists within the educational system. If we consider education a key driver of social mobility, it is essential to examine education within the context of broader societal structures. A report from the Joint Committee on Education and Skills[30] underscores the need to recognise ongoing inequality within the Irish education system. It highlights the complex nature of educational disadvantage, emphasising its intersectionality across various dimensions including class, community, family

25 Department of Education. "Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/;

26 Technological University Dublin. "Grant Information." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.tudublin.ie/for-students/student-services-and-support/fees-grants/grant-information/.

27 Economic and Social Research Institute. (2019). *Growing Up in Ireland: Key findings: Cohort '98 at 20 years old.* ESRI.

28 Hearne, Rory and Cian McMahon. "Cherishing All Equally 2016 Economic Inequality in Ireland." Dublin: TASC, 2016. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_inequalityreport_2016_web.pdf.

29 Department of Education. "Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/.

30   Oireachtas. "Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report 2019." Available at: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/report/2019-11-27/37/

dynamics, policy implementations, and school environments. The report outlines the dual nature of disadvantage as both horizontal and vertical: horizontally, existing policies and practices fail to coalesce effectively, exacerbating disparities; vertically, structural inadequacies and policy deficiencies impact educational institutions. Below are analyses illustrating the nature of ongoing educational inequality in Ireland.

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Data

The 2022 PISA report found that in Ireland, students in the top 25% socio-economic group outperformed students in the bottom 25% by 74 points in mathematics. This gap is smaller than the 93-point difference observed across OECD countries. Additionally, 12% of those in the bottom 25% socio-economic group scored in the top quarter for mathematics, which is higher than the OECD average of 10%[31]. PISA scores also reveal that students in DEIS schools underperform compared to those in non-DEIS schools. This suggests an ongoing need for focused attention on resource allocation and institutional support for DEIS schools.

Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) Data

The Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study, a national longitudinal project, tracks the educational progress of two cohorts: 8,000 from "Cohort '98" and 10,000 from "Cohort '08."

In 2018/19, when Cohort '98 students were aged 20, those whose parents were professionals scored, on average, 138 points more in their Leaving Certificate than those whose parents were from lower-skilled backgrounds. Moreover, students from two-parent families tended to perform better than those from single-parent families.[32] Additionally, 92% of students whose mothers had a university degree were in education, with 86% in higher education, compared to only 78% of those whose mothers had lower educational attainment, of whom 48% were in higher education. These findings also reveal a connection between educational expectations and socio-economic status. For example, 84% of mothers in the highest family income quintile expected their children to earn a degree, while only 54% of mothers in the lowest income quintile shared this expectation[33].

Inequality in retention and progression at third-level

The most recent data from the HEA on progression rates for new entrants in the 2021/22 academic year reveals some concerning trends in student retention.[34] The report shows a overall increase in the non-progression rate, which rose to 15% in 2021/22, from 12% in 2020/21. This 3 percentage point rise indicates that more students are failing to progress to the next academic year. When broken down by National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level, the findings show that non-progression rates

31   35 OECD. "PISA 2022 results." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.oecd.org/publication/pisa-2022-results/country-notes/ireland-01173012/.

32   Source: Growing Up in Ireland, Key Findings: Cohort '98 at 20 years old in 2018/19Average points in leaving certificate by social class, gender and family typehttps://www.growingup.gov.ie/pubs/KF4-Web.pdf
Source: Growing Up in Ireland, Key Findings: Cohort '98 at 20 years old in 2018/19

33   Growing Up in Ireland, Key Findings: Cohort '98 at 20 years old in 2018/19 Participation in higher education by educational expectations of the young person and their mother at age 13 https://www.growingup.gov.ie/pubs/KF4-Web.pdf

34   Higher Education Authority. (2024). Non-progression and completion dashboard. Retrieved November 30, 2024, from https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/progression/non-progression-and-completion-dashboard/

are highest at Level 7, with 31% of students failing to progress.[35] This is followed by Level 6 students at 25%, while Level 8 students, typically pursuing honours degrees, had the lowest non-progression rate at 14%. The report also highlights a significant socio-economic divide in progression rates, with disadvantaged students experiencing the highest non-progression rate at 23%, compared to just 12% among their affluent counterparts.[36] These findings point to the continuing challenges faced by disadvantaged students in higher education, suggesting a need for targeted support to address the disparities in retention and progression. The increase in non-progression rates calls for further attention to the factors affecting student success, particularly at lower NFQ levels and for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

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35   Central Statistics Office. (2023). Higher education outcomes: Non-progression 2021/22. Retrieved from https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-heo/highereducationoutcomes-nonprogression2021/
36   HEA (2024)

2. Methodology

2. Methodology

This report is based on a systematic review of existing literature and national-level data, combined with primary research conducted by TASC. The primary research involved an online survey, focus groups, and in-depth interviews to comprehensively capture the perspectives of Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) members on the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme, particularly in the context of the forthcoming DEIS review. The research focused on three key areas: individual DEIS supports, perceived advantages and disadvantages of DEIS status, and suggestions for improvements in the upcoming review.

The online survey gathered responses from 227 TUI teachers across 23 counties. Of these, 120 were from DEIS schools, while 107 were from non-DEIS schools. Approximately 95% of respondents were from mixed-gender schools. Dublin had the largest representation (41 respondents), followed by Donegal (22) and Kerry (21).

In addition to teachers, a parallel survey collected input from 49 school management members. Of these, 30 were from DEIS schools and 19 from non-DEIS schools. The management respondents included 10 principals, 17 deputy principals, and 22 assistant principals, offering a range of leadership perspectives on the DEIS programme.

To enrich the quantitative findings, qualitative insights were gathered through four focus groups with teachers from both DEIS and non-DEIS schools. These focus groups allowed participants to discuss their experiences and perspectives in greater depth, complementing the survey data. Further qualitative depth was achieved through interviews with five school principals and deputy principals, who provided detailed accounts of their schools' experiences with DEIS.

This multi-method approach, combining survey data, focus groups, and interviews, provides a robust understanding of TUI members' views, offering a nuanced picture of the DEIS programme's strengths, challenges, and areas for improvement ahead of the planned review.

3. Teacher and School Management Perspectives

3. Teacher and School Management Perspectives

The following section presents the key findings from the survey, interviews, and focus groups. **Section 3.1** examines the perceived effectiveness of specific DEIS supports according to TUI members. **Section 3.2** addresses job satisfaction. **Section 3.3** highlights the perceived benefits of the DEIS programme for both students and teachers, while **Section 3.4** explores its perceived drawbacks. Finally, **Section 3.5** outlines suggestions and recommendations from TUI members for the upcoming DEIS review.

3.1 DEIS Supports

Home School Community Liaison (HSCL)

The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) is a dedicated teacher role aimed at fostering collaboration between families, schools, and communities to support student attendance and retention. Both the survey results and focus groups identified the HSCL as one of the most effective and valued DEIS resources among both teaching staff and school management. The HSCL was consistently regarded as an essential support within school communities. Survey responses from DEIS teachers indicated a relatively high level of satisfaction with the resources allocated to the HSCL role. Approximately 55.3% of respondents rated these resources as 'good' or 'excellent', compared to 13.8% who described them as 'poor' or 'very poor'. Focus group participants reaffirmed the importance of the HSCL role but expressed concern that its value is not adequately reflected in DEIS funding. Many highlighted the overwhelming workload faced by HSCLs, particularly in large schools, and raised concerns about the risk of burnout when one individual is responsible for extensive student populations.

> *"[Our HSCL] is a single man (...). There is 1000 students in our school and there's almost 700 in the primary school we share him with. (...) He's phenomenal but he's been doing it for a year. How can they not burnout after that? Like it's phenomenal, but that's unacceptable".*
> (DEIS Teacher, Focus Group Participant)

School Completion Program (SCP)

Survey respondents were asked to rate the resources available to their school to support their school completion plans. For this question, respondents in DEIS schools were more likely to rate the quality as either 'good' or 'excellent' than respondents in non-DEIS schools (35% to 19.8%).

Guidance Support

The guidance support in DEIS schools allocates additional hours to assist students in making informed decisions about their future education and career paths. The teacher survey revealed notable differences between DEIS and non-DEIS schools in terms of career guidance resources. DEIS respondents were almost twice as likely as their non-DEIS counterparts to rate the quality of the resources available for career guidance as 'excellent' (12.2% compared to 6.6%). However, despite these positive ratings, approximately one-in-five respondents from both groups reported

that the resources for career guidance in their schools were either 'poor' or 'very poor'. This suggests that, while there is a recognition of the value of career guidance, there are still significant concerns regarding the adequacy of the support provided in many schools.

Career Development Initiatives & Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Teacher survey respondents were queried as to whether they had ever used the OIDE support service to support their career development. Just under half of all respondents reported that they had used OIDE with DEIS respondents more likely than non-DEIS to have answered yes (58.5% compared to 34.9%).

Teachers in both non-DEIS and DEIS schools were then asked if they had ever used other government initiatives to support their career development. Overall, only 28% of teachers responded that they had, 54.1% had not, whilst 17.9% were unsure. 32.5% of DEIS respondents had used other career development initiatives than OIDE, compared to only 13.2% of non-DEIS respondents.

Of those who answered yes, the different initiatives mentioned were varied. Of those who answered this question, most cited one initiative they had used. Very few responded that they had used more than one or two programs. A large number of respondents were unsure as to if they had used an initiative, what qualified as a career development initiative and many appeared uncertain as to what resources were available to them.

The most common answers of initiatives undertaken were: Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST); education centres; Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT); some form of teacher further education such as National College of Ireland (NCI) courses or funding for a postgraduate degree/ diploma in areas such as school leadership (PDSL). Other popular supports that were either devolved from government or part state-funded were; the National Council for Special Education (NCSE); The National Behavioural Support Service (NBSS); the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA); and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPs). However, due to the low number of responses, these examples are not greatly representative of the larger teacher population.

Respondents were then asked the question *'how effective do you feel government initiatives are in supporting your teaching career?'*. Results indicated that both DEIS and non-DEIS teachers were relatively unsatisfied with government initiatives with 'poor' being the most common answer amongst both groups.

Focus group participants discussed the quality and provision of career development initiatives in more depth. These teachers felt that there was generally quite poor CPD integration within the teaching system and support to avail of it. Participants felt that there were limited incentives for teachers to complete CPD as there was no time designated to avail of it and limited funding available.

Focus group participants felt that 'real-world' knowledge and advice was also frequently absent from much of the training, and stressed their belief that those with long-term and recent experience working in a classroom would be the best placed to deliver CPD.

> "*I've had really positive experiences of CPD, and I've had really negative experiences. And all of the negatives have been from people who have left the classroom years and years ago. The most valuable ones are delivered by people who are still there and who are working in the same environment. They can give you real life experiences in real life situations that actually will enrich your own teaching*". (DEIS Teacher, Focus Group Participant)

Student/Teacher Ratios

Many teachers in DEIS schools who were surveyed frequently noted that the smaller teacher-pupil ratios promised by the DEIS programme were not being implemented in practice. In open-ended responses, they suggested that recruitment challenges for teaching staff, particularly in core subjects, were among the reasons for this discrepancy. When surveyed the majority of teachers in DEIS school selected that they taught in classes of 20-25 on average.
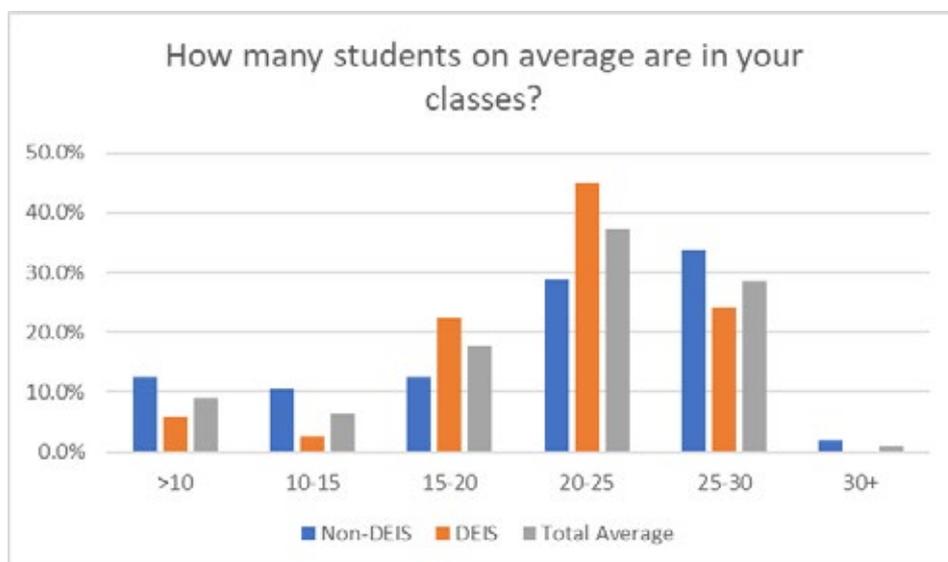

Figure 1: Average class size

Around 57% of teachers in DEIS schools felt that the pupil-teacher ratio in their classes was too high, this was in comparison to around 53% of non-DEIS respondents. Qualitative answers found that teachers in DEIS schools felt as though they could not provide the necessary support and attention to students in large classes and without team-teaching or SNA support. These teachers felt that the already challenging environment of diverse student needs and abilities was exacerbated by class size.

> "*I would like to see a greater teacher/student ratio. Unless you have worked in a school like ours you really have no idea how mentally draining each day is.*" (DEIS teacher survey respondent)

General Facilities & Supports

Nearly 10% of DEIS respondents responded that their facilities were 'very poor', in comparison to only 2.8% of non-DEIS respondents. Both DEIS and non-DEIS respondents were similarly satisfied with the quality of their technological equipment. This included resources such as computers, tablets and projectors. In relation to other school facilities (i.e. science labs, sports hall, art rooms etc.), DEIS

respondents were more likely to rate their facilities as either 'poor' or 'very poor' in comparison to non-DEIS respondents (32.5% compared to 24.5%).

Survey respondents were asked to rate the resources available in their school for additional learning supports. For this question, DEIS and non-DEIS answers were relatively similar, with the majority answering that it was either 'good' or 'average'. In an interview with a principal from a DEIS school, it was highlighted that while resources for additional learning support had increased, the demand for these resources had also risen. There was a growing number of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), as well as those requiring English language support and mental health support.

3.2 Job Satisfaction

The reported job satisfaction of teachers in DEIS and non-DEIS schools was generally similar, with few reporting that they were 'very dissatisfied' or 'very satisfied', and most respondents feeling either 'satisfied' or 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'. There was a greater variety of responses from teachers in DEIS schools. When given the opportunity to elaborate on their job satisfaction, some found the work rewarding, while others described aspects of working in a DEIS school as stressful or emotionally draining. These perspectives were expanded on in focus groups and are expanded on in later sections on the perceived advantages and disadvantages of DEIS status.
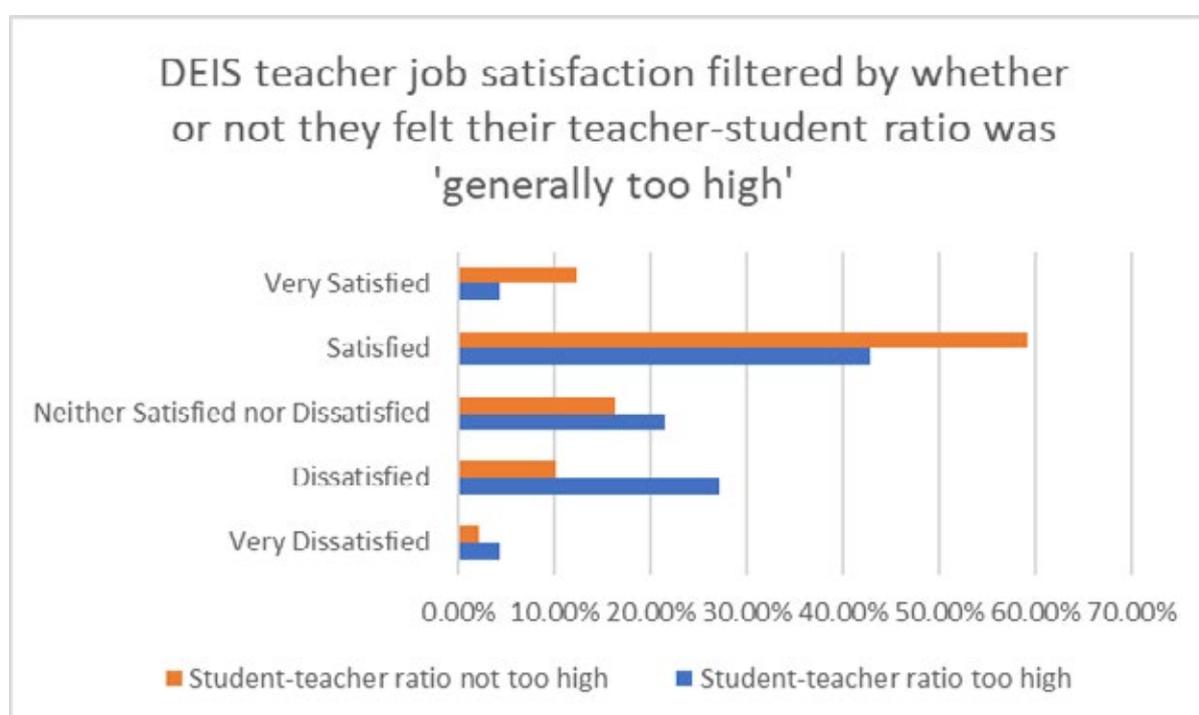

Figure 2: Job Satisfaction

3.3 Perceived Advantages of DEIS Status

In the survey, teachers were asked the open question *"what do you feel is the main advantage of your school having DEIS status for your students?".* Most answers to this question pertained to increased funding, support and resources for students as a result of DEIS. Most respondents focused on tangible and basic benefits for students, such as the provision of free books, pens and copies. These resources were described as the necessary and foundational basics for student learning.

Many noted DEIS' food programmes as one of the more successful resources. Breakfast clubs in particular were popular among these answers. Other frequent resources amongst teachers included HSCL and Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP).

Higher levels of school completion and student retention as a result of targeted DEIS resources was frequently mentioned by survey respondents. A small number of respondents focused on the structural or societal benefits, such as DEIS' broader role in opportunity creation in terms of school completion and wider recognition of student difficulties.

Opportunity Creation

Survey respondents were asked a range of questions aimed at understanding DEIS' impact on educational outcomes. Around 61.8% of respondents felt that the DEIS programme increased their students' opportunities for higher education, with 23.6% answering that they were unsure and 14.6% saying no. A further 73.2% of respondents felt that the DEIS programme increased their students' opportunities for further education, with only 8.1% believing that it did not.

Around half of the respondents felt that DEIS increases their students' opportunities for on-the-job training and apprenticeships, with 22% disagreeing and 24.4% uncertain. Finally, teacher respondents mentioned that DEIS opened the door for other smaller, yet valuable, opportunities such as funding school trips through bus fares.

Benefits of DEIS for Teachers

DEIS teacher survey respondents were asked *"what do you feel is the main advantage of your school having DEIS status for you as a teacher?".* To this question, many responded that there were little to no benefits. This answer was generally accompanied by complaints regarding time-consuming paperwork, a challenging work environment or that DEIS resources and funding were insufficient in comparison to need.

> *"To be honest I don't see any advantage in fact compared to non-DEIS colleagues. I feel a far greater responsibility and expectation to be more than a teacher of a subject." (DEIS teacher survey respondent)*

> *"(on the advantage of DEIS status) Very little if anything. it increases the workload and the level of verbal abuse and other challenging behaviours you're expected to sustain" (DEIS teacher survey respondent)*

Of those answers that explicitly related to teachers, most revolved around being able to support student learning better with the aid of smaller classes, HSCL, extra hours and support. A couple

responded that DEIS led to them feeling empowered to help disadvantaged students in some capacity. For these teachers, DEIS support enabled them to better support student learning, whether that be through keeping students fed and happy, or providing them with basic supplies such as pens and books.

> *"I push my students to attain/achieve the best results possible. DEIS status has empowered me to not only do this but to also differentiate between students' abilities and to encourage them to pursue a course/apprenticeship/job suitable for them. DEIS status has given me a far greater understanding of my students in respect of socio-economic background and their family history. My current role as a HSCL has given me an understanding that I feel every teacher needs". (DEIS teacher survey respondent)*

Teachers' preferences regarding the DEIS programme

The research reveals considerable interest among teachers in the prospect of their schools joining the DEIS programme. Both the quantitative and qualitative responses indicate a strong level of enthusiasm, with 45.3% of teachers in non-DEIS schools agreeing that obtaining DEIS status would benefit their students. However, 48% of respondents were either unsure or felt it would have no effect, while a smaller proportion of 6.6% disagreed, showing a degree of uncertainty or differing views on the potential benefits for students.

Teachers in non-DEIS schools were also asked whether they would prefer to work in a school that is part of the DEIS programme. 31.1% of respondents expressed a preference for working in a DEIS school, compared to 7.6% who indicated they would not and 61.3% who reported that they were unsure or had no preference. These results suggest that while there is some openness to working in a DEIS school, many teachers remain ambivalent, potentially due to a lack of familiarity with the programme or concerns about the challenges associated with it.

In comparison, DEIS teachers were asked about their preferences regarding working in non-DEIS schools. The findings indicate that a majority of DEIS teachers preferred to remain in DEIS schools, suggesting a stronger attachment or commitment to the programme among those already involved. This comparison highlights a key difference in attitudes between DEIS and non-DEIS teachers, with the latter group displaying more uncertainty or less familiarity with the programme's potential value for their professional experience.

These findings emphasise the importance of addressing misconceptions and enhancing awareness of the DEIS programme's objectives and benefits, which could help foster a more informed and positive perception among non-DEIS teachers.

School leadership perspectives on advantages of DEIS status

When school leaders in DEIS schools were asked, "What do you feel is the main advantage of your school having DEIS status for your students?" the majority of responses focused on the additional resources, supports, and funding made available to schools. These answers were largely aligned with those of the DEIS teacher group. A notable point was the emphasis on the HSCL role, which was the most frequently mentioned resource across both management and teacher responses. However, one notable difference was the mention of guidance support by DEIS management, a

resource not identified at all by teachers. This discrepancy could suggest a potential disconnect between the perspectives of school management and teaching staff regarding the specific supports in place.

When asked, "What do you feel is the main advantage of your school having DEIS status for you as a school leader?", DEIS management provided answers largely centred around the resources that help bridge the gaps commonly encountered in disadvantaged schools, with the HSCL role again being prominently mentioned. Funding, greater resources, and overall support were the most common responses. In contrast to teachers, management expressed a more positive view of DEIS targets and goals, with many seeing them as a valuable tool for guiding school improvement and maintaining momentum for positive change. DEIS targets were viewed as particularly beneficial in the context of guidance and fostering progress. However, some management respondents did express disappointment, noting that despite the additional resources, they had not observed a significant improvement in student learning as a result of DEIS status. A few acknowledged the gap between the theoretical benefits of DEIS support and its practical application, suggesting that, in some cases, DEIS support was not translating into tangible improvements for both teachers and students.

3.4 Perceived disadvantages of DEIS status

Despite many respondents acknowledging the advantages of DEIS status, several also pointed to its perceived disadvantages, though these were less frequently mentioned than the positives. Common concerns included stigma and the administrative burden, both of which were regularly noted in survey responses. Interestingly, many respondents felt that while there were disadvantages, the pros of DEIS far outweighed the cons. Even those teachers who expressed dissatisfaction with the quality and supply of DEIS funding and resources nonetheless emphasised that any assistance was appreciated and necessary, a sentiment that was reinforced in the focus group discussions.

Stigma

Stigma surrounding DEIS schools was a recurring theme. While some teachers felt that negative attitudes had diminished over time, the majority still expressed concerns about the persistent stigma attached to DEIS status. This stigma was primarily characterised by negative preconceptions of the student body as being 'non-achieving' or associated with schools of lower status compared to non-DEIS schools. Teachers noted that this stigma not only impacted students but also extended to teachers, parents, and the wider community.

Many teachers believed that harmful stereotypes, such as the view that DEIS students are 'non-academic' or 'low-achieving', adversely affected students' work ethic, motivation, and self-confidence. Some teachers suggested that these stereotypes were internalised by students, which in turn impacted their attitudes and behaviours towards learning. Several teachers expressed the view that this stigma created a toxic culture within DEIS schools, with some students seemingly resigning themselves to these low expectations.

Other teachers suggested that stigma deterred parents from enrolling their children—especially those without special educational needs—into DEIS schools. This was thought to contribute to

lower enrolment numbers and potentially skew the ratio of student needs within classrooms. Some teachers also felt that the stigma affected their professional standing, with a perception that they were 'looked down upon' by their colleagues in non-DEIS schools. One respondent noted:

> "Teachers employed in DEIS schools are looked down upon. It should be the opposite; they should be admired for their resilience given the difficulties encountered on a daily basis." (DEIS teacher survey respondent)

Another respondent shared the experience of stigma among parents, stating:

> "Some parents don't understand the benefits of sending their children to a DEIS school. This can lead to the perception that the school is not as good as other schools." (DEIS school leader survey respondent)

As mentioned by several survey respondents, many teachers believed that this stigma was exacerbated by the lack of public education on DEIS and its benefits. One focus group participant recalled an encounter in a rural school that highlighted this misunderstanding:

> "In the rural school that I taught in, somebody asked, did they even do a leaving cert there? So, there was that idea that the convent or the brothers did the Leaving Cert and the other school, all you did was just minding them" (DEIS Teacher, Focus Group)

Paperwork and Administration

Teachers consistently voiced frustration with the paperwork and administrative duties associated with DEIS schools. This concern was raised in response to both the questions "What would you like to see from the upcoming DEIS review?" and "Do you feel there are any disadvantages to having DEIS status?" Many teachers reported that the additional administrative workload imposed by DEIS requirements was often distracting, counterproductive, and time-consuming. One teacher succinctly expressed this frustration:

> "Pointless miles of paperwork to be filled in to justify your existence." (DEIS Teacher Survey Respondent)

The issue of paperwork was discussed in greater depth during focus group sessions. While participants acknowledged that such administrative tasks were important for ensuring accountability, they felt strongly that the burden it placed on teachers should be properly accounted for. One participant remarked:

> "You really want high accountability which is fine, but it must come with a system of high support." (DEIS Teacher Survey Respondent)

Many teachers felt that DEIS planning, as a part of the overall administrative workload, was particularly overwhelming. Teachers reported that the planning process was often vaguely understood by staff, and at times, it distracted from the core focus of teaching. Focus group participants were particularly vocal about the complexities and perceived inefficiencies of the DEIS planning process, which will be explored in greater detail in the DEIS review section of this report.

Challenging Work Environment

Both survey and focus group participants frequently highlighted the challenging work environment in DEIS schools. Some teachers believed that the DEIS designation could inadvertently attract students with behavioural difficulties and expressed concerns that school management sometimes used the DEIS status as an excuse for student behavioural issues. This perspective raised concerns about the broader culture within DEIS schools.

Furthermore, the challenge of managing large class sizes with diverse student needs was mentioned frequently. Teachers felt stretched thin, unable to adequately support every student in the classroom. Some teachers also expressed concerns that by providing students with extensive free resources and support, DEIS schools were removing a degree of personal responsibility from students, which led to some students taking support for granted. These concerns were echoed in one of the focus groups and will be revisited later in the report.

One survey respondent described this issue as follows:

> "I feel it is a disadvantage for our students as Senior Management are not dealing with behavioural issues appropriately and use the excuse of the students being 'from DEIS backgrounds'. It has developed a toxic culture in the school whereby the students themselves write themselves off before they have even begun, claiming themselves that they are DEIS students and it's a DEIS school, so the expectations are automatically lower." (DEIS Teacher Survey Respondent)

School leadership perspectives on the disadvantages of DEIS status

When DEIS management were asked "Do you feel there are any disadvantages to having DEIS status?", many echoed the concerns raised by teachers, particularly regarding stigma. Some management respondents shared the belief that DEIS status often attracted a high proportion of disadvantaged students, while deterring others who did not require the same level of support. Similar to the teacher responses, management also pointed to the excessive workload associated with DEIS status. However, while paperwork was a significant concern for teachers, it was less frequently mentioned by management, suggesting that the administrative burden may be more of an issue for teachers.

Management's complaints tended to focus more on the challenges of recruiting teachers due to the DEIS stigma, dealing with a stressful work environment, and the lack of financial compensation for the demands of managing a DEIS school. While management expressed appreciation for the DEIS targets in other responses, they also noted that these targets could sometimes feel distracting or overly burdensome.

3.5 Upcoming DEIS Review

Funding Allocation

A strong desire for a needs-based approach to DEIS funding and support was evident in the survey findings. There was broad consensus that greater student need should justify increased DEIS support. Some respondents suggested that DEIS funding should include further differentiation between schools, advocating for a tiered system that directs more resources to areas of greatest need. Teachers and school leadership in DEIS schools noted that while administrative tasks were important for ensuring accountability, they were not adequately supported. Teachers expressed a need for more resources to alleviate this burden, with some suggesting that reducing contact hours could provide more time to focus on administrative responsibilities.

One respondent described the importance of tailored funding approaches that would better serve the varying needs of DEIS schools:

> "[We need] Supports allocated depending on the needs of the school. Every DEIS school is different and has differing needs and these needs should be looked at." (DEIS Teacher Survey Respondent)

Both teachers and management voiced the belief that greater autonomy for schools in allocating DEIS funding would better address the specific needs of students. Respondents suggested that, if schools had more control over how resources were distributed, DEIS support could be maximised to its full potential. However, there was also a prevalent sense of pessimism among teachers about the effectiveness of current DEIS funding, with many stating that they could not perceive any significant impact on student outcomes. This scepticism, found across both the survey and focus group findings, indicates a need for greater transparency regarding the allocation and impact of funding. One teacher articulated their concerns:

> "I feel there is an awful lot of money being spent on extra help and sometimes it is so vague that really it is making no difference." (DEIS Teacher Survey Respondent)

In terms of specific resources, the survey, focus groups and interviews highlighted that the HSCL service, as well as support for the time-consuming nature of paperwork and administration, were areas in need of better funding. Both teachers and management agreed that the HSCL provision should either be expanded or accompanied by a set ratio of HSCL staff to students. Non-DEIS respondents argued that the benefits of HSCL should be extended beyond DEIS schools, reflecting a belief that all schools could benefit from such support.

Survey responses highlighted that student-teacher ratios remain a significant concern for teachers in DEIS schools. Many reported that current initiatives to reduce these ratios are not evident in practice, or that students require more intensive support than current class sizes permit. One teacher expressed frustration with the challenges posed by large class sizes:

> "I don't feel there is any advantage to having DEIS status as a teacher. The students require significantly more one-to-one attention, which can't be catered for due to the level of additional needs across a class group as well as the class numbers." (DEIS Teacher Survey Respondent)

Job dissatisfaction was frequently linked to class sizes, suggesting that future investments aimed at reducing these ratios could help improve teacher satisfaction.

DEIS Planning & Targets

Leadership staff in DEIS schools indicated a desire for greater flexibility in achieving DEIS targets, alongside a reduction in the overall emphasis placed on meeting them. There was also a call for simplification of the DEIS planning process.

Teachers in DEIS schools expressed frustration with the uncertainty and lack of guidance surrounding DEIS planning. One participant shared their experience:

> "I don't think enough supports are given to schools on how to plan. I went to one of the workshops where the idea was that everybody who went on could ask someone questions for 10 minutes. I was like, what do these plans look like? Give me an example, show me what it looks like in another school? And because those plans aren't published, you don't know what it looks like in other schools. There's nobody there to go, this did work, that didn't work." (DEIS Teacher Focus Group Participant)

Some teachers also voiced concerns that DEIS planning was happening in isolation, with collaboration seen as a potential solution to common problems faced by schools. Focus group participants suggested that publishing DEIS plans or having OIDE facilitators provide ongoing planning assistance could help overcome some of these challenges.

One participant highlighted the complexity of planning in large schools:

> "Something concrete I think, could really help teachers, for schools to come up with DEIS plans. We have a staff of over 100. And to come up with a DEIS plan from over 100 people is pretty much impossible, unless there's somebody there going, Okay, well, this is how we need to break it down." (DEIS Teacher Focus Group Participant)

Survey findings also revealed a broader desire for basic training and education on the DEIS programme and how to optimise its benefits. Focus group participants noted that there was often an expectation that teachers should already understand the essentials of DEIS, despite a lack of clear guidance or formalised training.

CPD Integration and Incentives

Both DEIS and non-DEIS teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the current government initiatives for Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Focus group participants suggested that CPD opportunities should be better integrated into the teaching system to make them more attractive and feasible for teachers. At present, teachers often have to create their own CPD opportunities,

with minimal support or encouragement from the wider educational community. The findings suggest that there is potential for further incentives, such as financial support or dedicated time, to encourage teachers to engage with CPD. One teacher expressed that CPD needed to be better integrated into the teaching system to ensure greater teacher participation:

> "I hate when I hear CPD actually, because that usually means that my Saturday morning is gone or my evening. I think if the government are really serious about it, they will give us the time, they will acknowledge the worth of our time." (non-DEIS Teacher Focus Group Participant)

Additionally, discussions revealed that the real-life experiences and knowledge of senior teachers in DEIS schools were not being effectively used to educate new staff. Some teachers suggested that the Department of Education and OIDE should actively seek out the expertise of experienced teachers to create knowledge-sharing networks.

Support for Transitions Beyond School

A recurring concern among teachers and school management was the inadequacy of scaffolding supports to assist students during key educational and life transitions following secondary school. Many felt that while DEIS provides extensive support during secondary education, this support diminishes sharply after students leave the system, fostering a dependency that may hinder their independence and resilience in the long term.

One teacher highlighted the potential consequences of this dependency:

> "So at what cost then is it to their own independence and resilience? We talk about resilience a lot. From my point of view, if you can't bounce back on your own without all those scaffolds and structures in place, when they're gone, you're going to snap." (DEIS Teacher Focus Group Participant)

Teachers emphasised the need for better transitional scaffolding to prevent students from "falling through the cracks." They advocated for a stronger focus on capacity-building in DEIS schools to equip students with the skills, confidence, and resilience needed to thrive beyond secondary education.

Concerns were also raised about dropout rates in higher education:

> "[We currently] measure success based on the number of students who go on to university and their first-year results. But how many actually stay in university? At the end of first year, how many of the rest are still in education? In our school, about 80-87% go on to third level — but how many are still there by September of second year?" (DEIS Principal Interview Participant)

These findings indicate the need for sustained transitional supports and capacity-building measures to help students navigate educational and life changes successfully.

DEIS versus Non-DEIS Perspectives

Both non-DEIS teachers and management were asked "What would you like to see from the upcoming DEIS review?" A significant number of non-DEIS teacher responses focused on their interest in their own schools qualifying for DEIS status and gaining access to its associated support. Many expressed a desire for more schools to benefit from DEIS status, with some even advocating for the universal provision of certain DEIS benefits, particularly the HSCL service, which was highly regarded among teachers and management alike.

Non-DEIS management shared similar concerns regarding the allocation of DEIS resources. They argued that the expansion of DEIS eligibility should include more schools, especially with regard to the HSCL service, which they believed should be made available to all schools, not just those with DEIS status. These respondents were less concerned with the quality of resources, focusing more on the quantity and distribution of resources across all schools. This viewpoint differed from the perspective of DEIS staff, who expressed concerns that the expansion of DEIS eligibility would dilute resources and undermine the programme's ability to support the most disadvantaged students effectively.

4. Recommendations

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1. Enhance Awareness of Available Resources

- **Department of Education (DoE):**

    o   Develop targeted training programmes for school staff to deepen their understanding of DEIS planning and its objectives.

    o   Address gaps in awareness through information sessions and dissemination of resources, ensuring stakeholders are informed about effective use of DEIS supports.

    o   Improve transparency by publishing DEIS plans at both school and national levels, while respecting data privacy considerations.

- **TUI:**

    o   Keep members informed about any updates to DEIS supports and strategies for their effective implementation.

2. Provide Planning Support through OIDE Facilitators

- **DoE and OIDE:**

    o   Deploy OIDE facilitators to assist schools periodically with developing, refining, and implementing DEIS plans.

    o   Simplify administrative processes related to DEIS planning and encourage facilitators to share effective practices from other schools facing similar challenges.

3. Implement Needs-Based and Transparent Funding Systems

- **DoE:**

    o   Introduce a tiered funding model that aligns resource allocation with the specific needs of schools and their communities.

    o   Provide greater local autonomy for schools to manage funds in addressing their specific priorities.

    o   Establish transparent reporting mechanisms to regularly share detailed information on funding allocation and expenditure, fostering trust among teachers and staff.

4. Ensure Compliance with Student-to-Teacher Ratios

- **DoE:**

  o Prioritise sufficient resource allocation to maintain smaller class sizes, particularly in schools with the highest levels of disadvantage.

  o Recruit additional teaching staff where necessary to ensure compliance with existing student-to-teacher ratio guidelines.

5. Improve Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

- **DoE:**

  o Disseminate clear and accessible information about available CPD opportunities and their benefits.

  o Offer incentives such as accreditation to encourage teacher participation in CPD.

  o Design CPD modules specifically addressing the unique challenges faced by DEIS teachers.

  o Ensure that teachers have adequate time to attend CPD sessions by offering release time and reducing administrative burdens.

- **TUI:**

  o Advocate for dedicated time within school schedules for CPD engagement.

6. Expand Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Services

- **DoE:**

  o Extend HSCL services to schools with high levels of disadvantage, including some non-DEIS schools.

  o Adjust HSCL allocations to reflect the size and demographic composition of schools to avoid unsustainable workloads for liaison officers.

  o Strengthen continuity by linking HSCL services across primary and post-primary DEIS schools to reduce drop-offs in engagement.

7. Combat the Stigma Surrounding DEIS Schools

- **DoE:**

  o Implement public campaigns to showcase the positive outcomes of DEIS schools and dispel negative misconceptions about their students and teachers.

- **TUI:**

  o Advocate for greater recognition of the contributions made by teachers in DEIS schools.

8. Reduce Administrative Burdens on Schools

- **DoE:**

  o Streamline data collection and reporting processes by consolidating forms and reducing redundancy.

  o Provide additional administrative staff to handle non-teaching tasks in DEIS schools.

  o Simplify DEIS planning and reporting requirements to improve efficiency without compromising accountability.

9. Increase Leadership Capacity in DEIS Schools

- **DoE:**

  o Offer leadership training tailored to the specific challenges of managing DEIS schools.

  o Create mentorship programmes pairing new school leaders with experienced DEIS principals.

  o Introduce additional leadership roles in schools with greater complexity or need to reduce the pressure on existing leadership staff.

10. Conduct Further Research

- **Higher Education Authority (HEA), DoE, and other researchers/research bodies:**

  o Investigate stigma associated with DEIS schools, including its effects on enrolment and teacher retention.

  o Conduct a cost-benefit analysis to evaluate the impact of expanding DEIS coverage compared to intensifying support in high-need areas.

  o Differentiate between the "DEIS effect" and underlying socio-economic factors when evaluating programme outcomes.

  o Explore the relationship between CPD participation, teacher satisfaction, and student outcomes to identify the most valuable training types.

5. Conclusion

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This research highlights both the significant achievements and persistent challenges associated with the DEIS programme. While the programme has made a meaningful contribution to reducing educational inequalities, it is also clear that many barriers remain. DEIS has played a crucial role in improving outcomes for disadvantaged students, narrowing retention gaps, and increasing access to higher education, fostering social mobility and greater equality. However, it is important to recognise that these successes are not without their challenges.

Schools in Ireland, particularly those within the DEIS framework, play a pivotal role in addressing the deep-rooted inequalities present in Irish society. By supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds and providing them with the resources and opportunities they might otherwise lack, these schools are vital in breaking cycles of poverty and inequality. However, despite these efforts, educational inequality cannot be viewed in isolation from broader societal inequities. Multiple intersections between educational disadvantage and wider social issues highlight how societal disparities manifest within the education system, underscoring the complex and multifaceted nature of educational disadvantage.

The persistent stigma attached to DEIS schools remains one of the most prominent challenges. Negative stereotypes about students' abilities, often rooted in assumptions of their socio-economic background, hinder both their academic progress and the professional esteem of their teachers. These perceptions affect student confidence, enrolment patterns, and public support for DEIS initiatives. Addressing this stigma through public awareness campaigns that celebrate the achievements of DEIS schools, alongside better recognition of the contributions made by teachers in these settings, is essential to combat these misconceptions.

Another critical area for improvement is equitable resource distribution. Despite the DEIS programme's goals of reducing class sizes, teachers report that class sizes in DEIS schools often mirror those of non-DEIS schools, which compromises the quality of instruction. Additionally, the physical infrastructure of many DEIS schools remains inadequate, particularly in areas like science labs and sports facilities. To ensure that DEIS schools can effectively support disadvantaged students, a more needs-based, transparent funding model is required. This would ensure that resources are allocated where they are most needed, without diminishing the support for schools that are already facing the greatest challenges.

The research also revealed significant concerns regarding the administrative burden placed on teachers and school leaders in DEIS schools. The complexity of planning and reporting, combined with a lack of administrative support, adds to teachers' workloads, detracting from their ability to focus on teaching. Simplifying these processes and providing additional administrative support would reduce workload pressures and improve the implementation of DEIS policies.

Further, while professional development (CPD) is seen as a necessary means of enhancing teaching quality, many teachers in DEIS schools expressed dissatisfaction with the relevance and accessibility of available CPD. Tailored CPD modules that address the specific challenges faced by DEIS teachers, coupled with the provision of adequate time for participation, would equip teachers with the tools needed to meet the diverse needs of their students. Leadership within DEIS schools also requires

strengthening. By providing specialised leadership training, mentorship programmes, and additional support roles, the capacity of school leaders to manage the complexities of their schools would be enhanced, improving the overall school environment.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges identified in this research requires a collaborative effort from policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders. The recommendations outlined in this report—from increasing funding transparency and improving professional development opportunities to addressing stigma and reducing administrative burdens—are essential to ensuring the continued success of the DEIS programme. Schools in Ireland are at the forefront of tackling inequalities, and by supporting and strengthening the DEIS programme, we can ensure that these schools continue to serve as vital agents of social change, helping to overcome the complex and interconnected issues of educational and societal disadvantage.

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This report, commissioned by the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), explores educators' views on the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. The study highlights DEIS's role in boosting student outcomes and social mobility while identifying persistent issues such as heavy teacher workloads, resource inequities, and stigma. The report offers key recommendations, including improved funding transparency, tailored professional development, and strengthened supports, to ensure continued progress in fostering educational equity.

TASC (Think tank for Action on Social Change) is an independent progressive think-tank whose core focus is addressing inequality and sustaining democracy.

The Teachers' Union of Ireland is a Trade Union organising teachers and lecturers in Ireland engaged in post-primary, higher and further education. TUI represents over 19,000 members in the education service. The Union is made up of 62 Branches in 19 Areas.

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