



POLICY SUBMISSION

Submission on Early School Leavers and Youth Unemployment to the National Economic and Social Forum

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Combat Poverty Agency welcomes the decision of the NESF to revisit its 1997 *Report on Early School Leaving and Youth Unemployment* and welcomes the opportunity to submit recommendations regarding the update of this document.

Early school leaving and, more broadly, educational disadvantage have been priority issues for the Agency for a number of years and have been addressed in successive strategic plans. This interest in educational disadvantage has evolved from growing concern nationally with the issue of early school leaving and mounting evidence of the relationship between educational under-attainment and poverty.

In making this submission, the Agency is fulfilling its statutory responsibility to advise on all aspects of social and economic policy relating to poverty. The submission is informed by the government commitment to the reduction and prevention of poverty, including educational disadvantage and early school leaving, as set out in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

The submission also draws on work undertaken by the Agency in relation to the issues of early school leaving and educational disadvantage. The Agency has produced a number of policy statements and research reports on these topics. Similarly, the Agency piloted an integrated local strategy for tackling educational disadvantage. The Agency's Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage (1996-2000) supported four local education networks¹, involving representatives from both the formal and informal education sectors, to develop and implement an integrated local response to educational disadvantage.

The Agency's submission is presented as follows:

- In the first instance, the submission presents the Combat Poverty Agency's definition of early school leaving and highlights the rationale behind this understanding.
- Secondly, the Agency identifies core principles that should guide any policy response to educational disadvantage and early school leaving in Ireland.
- Finally the submission highlights the Agency's recommendations regarding the prevention and mitigation of early school leaving for inclusion in the updated version of the NESF report. These recommendations are presented under three core themes:
 - Investment to prevent early school leaving;
 - Supporting potential and actual early school leavers;
 - Integration.

¹ Drogheda Youth Educational Network, Co. Louth; Killinarden Education Network, West Tallaght, Co. Dublin; Network for Educational Support Tuam Area, Co. Galway and Tralee Education Network, Co. Kerry.

2. DEFINING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

It is clear that there is a diversity of opinion nationally around what constitutes early school leaving. Legally², early school leaving refers to non-participation in school before reaching the age of 16 years or before completion of three years post-primary education, whichever is later.

Cullen³ suggests that early school leaving can be understood as young people leaving school before the legal school leaving age and/or leaving school with limited or no formal qualifications.

The Agency places particular significance on the issue of leaving school with limited or no qualifications. It acknowledges that young people leaving education without recognised qualifications are at a disadvantage in the labour market, have their personal and social development curtailed, and are at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion⁴. In this regard, the Agency endorses the assertion of the 1997 NESF report that the “definition of early school leaving needs to be seen in terms of the generally unfavourable outcomes facing such students” (1997: 11).

Consequently, the Agency defines early school leaving as leaving the education system *without a minimum of five passes in the Leaving Certificate or equivalent qualification*⁵.

The Agency recognises that, within this definition, certain groups of early school leavers are likely to experience greater disadvantage than others, in particular those who leave the system before completion of the junior cycle of post-primary education⁶.

Additionally, the Agency recognises that early school leaving is primarily an issue affecting young people from backgrounds of multiple disadvantage. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are a) more likely to underachieve in the education system and are b) more likely to leave school early than their more advantaged peers. Reasons include high participation costs of education (clothes, books, meals, etc.), low levels of parental support, the lack of suitability of school curricula and the failure of the system to address the needs of minority groups (Travellers, refugees, children with disability).

² As stipulated in the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

³ Cullen B. (2000); *Evaluating Integrated Responses to Educational Disadvantage*, Dublin, The Combat Poverty Agency.

⁴ Johnston H (1997), ‘The Nature and Effectiveness of Irish Policy Interventions in Addressing Educational Disadvantage’ in *Transitions in Youth: Combating Exclusion. Proceedings of the fourth European Workshop of Network on Transitions in Youth*, Dublin, ESRI & Combat Poverty Agency p307.

⁵ An important aspect of this definition is the acknowledgement that many students who leave the formal second level system pursue education and training programmes leading to certification through apprenticeships, Youthreach courses and through Senior Traveller Training Centres.

⁶ i.e. the target group of primary concern in the 1997 NESF Report.

3. PRINCIPLES FOR POLICY TO TACKLE EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

The Agency believes that the following principles should guide any policy response to early school leaving:

- addressing educational disadvantage and early school leaving should be seen as an inherent part of ensuring the right of a child to education;
- policy should reflect an understanding that early school leaving is a symptom of a wider range of issues affecting the lives of children, their families and their communities and the structure and content of the school system;
- given the complex range of issues contributing to early school leaving, efforts to prevent and address this problem must be of matching complexity; in this regard, an integrated multi-level response, incorporating all interests involved in the education and welfare of young people, should be at the core of any response to address early school leaving in Ireland;
- schools should take a proactive role in addressing early school leaving and should avoid the use of expulsions as a contributory factor to young people leaving the system without qualifications;
- parents and community groups should be resourced and supported to have an active role in local and national initiatives to tackle early school leaving;
- early identification of young people at risk of underachievement within the education system and early intervention must be a core part of any policy to address early school leaving;
- policy must acknowledge that school provision may not be the most appropriate form of provision for many young people and take account of the fact that many early school leavers continue in relevant education and training leading to appropriate certification;
- policy must also acknowledge that simply retaining young people in the formal education system will not remove inequality in educational outcome;
- appropriate policy targets should, therefore, focus on the prevention and elimination of young people leaving education without a minimum educational qualification, should afford merit to non-formal and non-academic learning and should emphasise an alteration in the relationship between educational outcome and social background.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Investment to prevent early school leaving

The Agency endorses the NESF's 1997 assertion that, in the context of addressing early school leaving, prevention is better than cure. Therefore, the Agency recommends State investment in the following:

4.1.1 Early Childhood Education

Given the volume of research that highlights the positive impact of high-quality early educational services on subsequent educational and social success of children, including those born at risk of educational underachievement and social exclusion⁷, it is recommended that all children in Ireland should have access to quality early education before their entry into primary school.

Specifically,

- Universal early education provision (taking account of state, community and private sector provision) should be introduced on a phased basis, prioritising disadvantaged children including those from the Travelling community, children with disabilities, children from lone parent families, homeless children and the children of refugees and asylum seekers.
- The costs of early education provision should be subsidised for low-income families.
- Service planning and provision should take account of the developmental level of children, their cultural background and their individual needs. Early education services for young children should be integrated into a community policy that is inclusive of parents and family.
- Current and future provision of early education should be child-centred, of high quality, well resourced with materials and with appropriately trained staff, and appropriate child/staff ratios.

4.1.2 Participation in Primary and Post-Primary Education

The Agency contends that young people's full participation in education should not be hindered due to the direct or indirect financial costs associated with education, particularly for low income groups and groups from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Similarly, the Agency believes that no child should leave primary school with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

Consequently, the Agency recommends the following:

- Eliminate the costs of participating in education for families of school-going children:
 - establish the full costs of clothing and footwear for school-going children and uprate the clothing and footwear scheme to meet these costs;

⁷ CMRS (1992), Education and Poverty, Dublin: CMRS, p.xvii

- provide additional financial support through the clothing and footwear scheme to cover additional costs associated with transition from primary to secondary school and from junior to senior cycle in second level;
 - integrate access to above supports with other educational subventions such as school meals and schoolbooks schemes;
 - enhance and broaden the scope of the school meals scheme.
- Ensure that current interventions at primary and post-primary level are effective in targeting children most at risk of educational underachievement and leaving school without qualifications, and address their academic, social, emotional and behavioural needs.
 - Provide adequate investment for appropriate in-school equipment for children with disabilities and special needs and review the procedures to ease the claiming of such costs by schools.
 - Continue the development of the National Educational Psychological Service and increase the speed with which this development is taking place. Similarly, ensure immediate and appropriate provision for young people with special needs throughout the school system, but particularly at primary level.
 - Ensure an adequate level of financial resourcing and targeted provision of learning support services to eliminate literacy problems among school children. Increase investment to facilitate the provision of learning support in Mathematics in all primary schools.
 - Ensure that there is adequate and appropriate provision of public and private transport to and from schools, including rural area provision.
 - Enhance investment in the Home/School/Community Liaison service to further develop home, school and community links.
 - Every school-going child should be tracked and monitored, including those with school attendance problems. In this regard, adequate resourcing should be made available to implement the Education (Welfare) Act as efficiently and effectively as possible.
 - Develop and implement a programme of IT access and training for all children that reflects the different interests and needs of people living in poverty or disadvantaged areas.
 - Build awareness among teachers of the global, national, local and personal dimensions of poverty and exclusion, their educational relevance and actions to combat them. This should be done through the development of appropriate modules both within initial teacher training and as part of ongoing in-service provision.
 - Ensure a full complement of suitably qualified teachers to meet the requirements of schools nationally and particularly in areas with high concentrations of multiple disadvantage.
 - Ensure appropriate and high quality evaluation of all preventative interventions addressing educational disadvantage and early school leaving,

and ensure the publication and dissemination of evaluation documents in the public domain.

- Resource ongoing curriculum development to a) ensure the relevance of primary and post-primary curricula to the diversity of students' social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds and b) to allow students to make choices relevant to their abilities and aptitudes.
- Improve measures for Traveller children and other minority groupings.
- The Agency welcomes the establishment of the Statutory Committee on Educational Disadvantage. A significant budget should be made available to the Educational Disadvantage Committee to ensure its access to a strong secretariat and technical support unit. The proposed technical support unit should possess strong research/policy analysis capability and a significant budget. This will be essential in facilitating the Committee to fulfill its role of advising the Minister for Education & Science on policies and strategies to identify and counteract educational disadvantage.

4.2 Supporting Potential and Actual Early School Leavers

- Ensure that actions to reduce early school leaving take account of less formal education and training opportunities and interventions outside the mainstream setting. Identify and develop progression routes for young people and ensure that each individual has access to mentoring services to help them identify and plan their education or training paths.
- Resource and evaluate non-formal education facilities to ensure high quality, relevant and efficient provision for those pursuing education and training opportunities in Youthreach, Community Training Workshops, Senior Traveller Training Centres, VTOS, etc.
- Ensure that sufficiently strong incentives are in place to reduce the risk of children leaving school early to enter the workplace. At the same time, it is important to ensure that workplace initiatives for young people who are in need of basic education and literacy training are provided.
- Continue the development of interventions designed to tackle early school leaving, such as the 8 –15 Early School Leaver Initiative and the Stay in School Retention Initiative. Ensure appropriate and high quality evaluation of these initiatives and ensure the publication and dissemination of evaluation documents in the public domain.
- Draw on the learning of other initiatives designed to address the needs of young people at risk – Neighbourhood Youth Projects; Springboard Initiatives; Youth Diversion Projects of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform; special projects undertaken by Area Based Partnerships and community organisations; the Educational Disadvantage Initiative of the Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and the work of the networks of the Combat Poverty Agency Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage.

- Ensure implementation of core recommendations from the White Paper on Adult Education⁸ - a national adult literacy strategy, expansion of part time options in further education through a Back to Education Initiative, improved opportunities for adult participation in third level education, a strengthened role for community education, the enhancement of supporting services such as guidance, counselling and childcare, and the establishment of a National Adult Learning Council and Local Adult Learning Boards for improved co-ordination, integration and planning, nationally and locally.

4.3 Integration

The Agency supports the 1997 NESF declaration that education-based solutions alone are insufficient to match the complexity of poverty and educational disadvantage, and that such solutions need to be situated in a wider 'whole community' approach (1997:51). Based on the experience of developing the Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage, the Agency contends that local integrated multi-level responses, incorporating all interests involved in the education and welfare of young people, should be at the core of efforts to address early school leaving in Ireland. Specifically, the Agency contends that there is a key role for local area-based networks in stimulating and developing integrated responses to educational disadvantage, the model developed in the Demonstration Programme.

Additionally,

- A full-time employed network co-ordinator is a necessary resource in the promotion of integrated responses. A co-ordinator is central in a) creating the conditions for new ways of collaborative working to develop, b) developing and sustaining effective inter-agency relationships and c) stimulating and supporting new initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage which respond to particular needs identified locally. The role of the network co-ordinator is primarily one of enabler and is essentially about supporting and resourcing the process of networking.
- Teacher involvement must be at the centre of integrated responses to tackle educational disadvantage. Whilst there is an implicit recognition of this at policy level, the capacity of teachers to engage is limited by the demands of their job. There is a need to facilitate the engagement of teachers in

⁸ Ireland (2000), *White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life*, Dublin, Stationery Office.

integrated processes and to release them, within agreed parameters, from direct teaching responsibilities for this purpose.

- There is a need at educational policy level to affirm and resource the role of informal education providers, particularly in the context of educational disadvantage, and draw in expertise within this sector to complement in-school provision with particular reference to teaching methodologies, curriculum content and monitoring.
- Resources are needed to support the development of new and emerging models of parental involvement, which support parents as equal partners in tackling educational disadvantage.
- The development of integrated structures and processes at local level should be matched by parallel structures and processes at central policy level. Links and intermediary mechanisms between these levels are needed to direct issues and lessons on the ground into policy development at national level.
- There has been a welcome recognition of the need for whole school planning and review. Training and support will be needed to maximise the potential of this approach. In addition, consideration should be given to including non-school educational partners (e.g. local youth and community organisations, statutory services, etc.) in this process as appropriate.