

Barnardos Submission  
to the Joint Oireachtas Committee for Education and Science

Staying in School: The Way Forward - Draft Report

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## Introduction

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee for Education & Science. The Draft Report is a positive contribution to the policy debate on the enduring problems of educational disadvantage and early school leaving in Ireland. Although the conclusions and recommendations of the report have yet to be drafted, we anticipate that our submission will assist in making an informed contribution to their formulation.

The layout of this document is as follows:

Section 1 – Background to Barnardos' submission

Section 2 – Brief commentary on the presentation of the Draft Report

Section 3 – Policy recommendations

## Section 1 - Background to Submission

The content of this submission is based on direct engagement by Barnardos with this issue through:

- (i) Direct service provision
- (ii) Organisational Policy (informed by national & international research).
- (iii) Campaigning & Advocacy work

### (i) Direct Service provision

Through our experience of working with children and families in over 40 centres around the country, Barnardos witnesses the daily lived experience of educational disadvantage on children and young people and how it can impact on their lives.

In conjunction with our family support services, we provide a range of targeted service responses including:

- Provision of quality pre-school education and care services
- Breakfast clubs
- After-school homework clubs
- Parent literacy classes
- Home-based homework support to children and parents
- Transition programmes from pre-school to primary school and primary to secondary school
- Direct support to maintain vulnerable school placements

These programmes involve collaborative relationships with local schools, home-school liaison officers, community groups and families.

### (ii) Organisational Policy

Barnardos' position is that education is a right, not a privilege. Education matters, not only because of its intrinsic value in allowing children and young people to develop intellectually and socially, but also because, in Ireland, as in many other countries, it is a

powerful predictor of adult life chances and a proven route out of poverty. Research tells us that those who leave school before the Leaving Certificate are more likely to be unemployed or lone parents, earn less if they have a job, have poorer health and higher crime levels.

However, disadvantaged children in Ireland continue to face stark inequalities of opportunities and outcomes in education. This is largely attributable to the fact that a child's life chances are still disproportionately affected by their family's social and economic position in Irish society. As a consequence, disadvantaged children are more likely to have difficulties in areas such as literacy and numeracy, to leave school early and are far less likely to progress to university or other higher education options. In fact, one in six young Irish people still leave school every year without reaching Leaving Certificate level. Literacy levels have also remained largely unchanged since 1980 with one in three pupils from disadvantaged areas continuing to have severe literacy difficulties (DES, 2006).

Thus, inequality in education in Ireland means that some children do not reach their potential because their opportunities are limited before they begin. This has substantial costs for the young people themselves and for society as a whole. Research tells us that higher rates of early school leaving mean higher exchequer expenditure on welfare, health and prisons and lower tax revenue. Therefore, sustained and targeted investment in measures tackling educational inequality can be viewed as fundamental to fairness and social justice as well as yielding economic benefits for society at large.

In brief:

- All children have a right to achieve their educational potential
- It is vital that the educational system does not prevent children benefiting from an education because they live in disadvantage or have special needs that require extra support.
- Our current educational system, despite definite improvements and developments, has a long way to go before it adequately serves the needs of the most vulnerable children and young people in Ireland.
- Education policy must re-examine how to deliver education and educational supports, focusing on how the system fits the child rather on how the child fits the system. Provision of appropriate supports in a timely fashion, through a holistic, child-centred approach, has been shown to improve a child's educational performance and retention rates in full-time education.
- International research has shown that early interventions at pre-school and primary level are more cost effective than later remediation. Quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is crucial in enhancing the later educational and social outcomes of disadvantaged children.
- Schools don't exist in isolation and neither do children. There is a need for joined-up planning and provision between education, health, welfare and youth justice services in addressing the multifaceted needs of children, young people and their families.
- Many of the supports needed are already in place but need firm commitment from government to ensure the joined up implementation and expansion of

services, despite the current economic climate. Failure to sustain and improve existing investment in tackling inequalities in education is a false economy. It serves to deprive more children of their potential and leads to higher costs for the state in the future.

### (iii) Campaigning & Advocacy Work

Barnardos undertakes campaigns to highlight the consequences for children and young people of inequality in our education system and to advocate for improvements in policy and service provision. Most recently:

May 2009 – *‘Written Out, Written Off – Failure to Invest in Education Deprives Children of their Potential’*. This campaign involved:

- Commissioning of literature review by Dr E. Smyth and Dr. S McCoy (ESRI)
- Qualitative interviews with a selection of key stakeholders, including parents, children, School Completion Programme Dept of Education and Science, teachers unions (ASTI, INTO, NAPD), National Education and Welfare Board (NEWB), Youthreach and a sample of five principals of Delivering Equality of Opportunity (DEIS) schools.
- On-line survey, involving over 300 respondents

## Section 2 – Brief commentary on the presentation of the Draft Report

The Draft Report is a comprehensive and rigorously researched document.

In terms of its overall presentation, we would concur with the critiques you identified in your cover letter. As the report currently stands, it can be cumbersome for the reader to follow, with core arguments being subsumed in parts by an excess of detail. The report will benefit from the editing you propose.

*In addition, we would like to make the following suggestions:*

- Chapter 1 would benefit from a statement regarding the purpose and aims of the report. This would provide a framework for the reader in considering subsequent chapters.
- Consideration could be given to including a separate chapter which details the methodology adopted in conducting Phases 1-3 of the study, including rationale and strengths/limitations of the methods employed. This may assist in reducing any unnecessary related repetition in chapters 4-6.
- Generally, greater use of tables in presenting data, expanding appendices by including excess data from the body of the report or referring the reader to relevant web sites (in lieu of detailed information on the functions of individual agencies, for example) may assist in reducing the size of chapters 3-6 in particular.

## Section 3 – Policy recommendations

Barnardos invite the Joint Oireachtas Committee for Education & Science to consider the following recommendations for the development of future national education policy.

1. Barnardos challenge the assumption contained in the Draft Report (see 7.3) that increased investment in education is 'simply not available' in the current economic climate. While we agree that 'maximising efficiency' throughout the system has some merit, the reality is that investment in education by successive Irish governments falls below international standards. Across the OECD countries, the average spend on education is 5.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP); in Ireland it is 4.6%.

Adequate investment in education, yields significant economic and social benefits for society at large. The long-term importance of this investment should not be forgotten, despite the current difficult climate. It is vital that investment in education is prioritised by Government to ensure the joined-up implementation and improvement of services.

*Educational equity is a moral imperative for a society in which education is a crucial determinant of life chances. (Levin, 2009, p.5)*

**Recommendation: Increase education spending to 5.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in line with the OECD average.**

2. Barnardos is totally opposed to cuts being made to education provision.

The issue of educational disadvantage is even more pertinent in the current economic climate where recent expenditure cuts have attracted much criticism in terms of their impact on the educational system as a whole and on disadvantaged groups in particular.

While funding for the DEIS programme has been ring-fenced, other measures involving cuts in vital supports (such as the abolition of the book grant scheme for non-DEIS schools, the reduced capitation grant for Travellers and the reduced curricular programme grants, in addition to the increase in class sizes) were seen to have a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged students, especially those attending non-DEIS schools.

However, what these cuts highlighted most, is the extreme vulnerability of the education system to external pressures, in the absence of a stated government commitment to prioritise the sector. Most concerning of all, is the lack of protection afforded within the education system itself, to the needs and interests of disadvantaged children and young people.

Therefore, Barnardos welcomes commitments made in the Renewed Programme for Government (10<sup>th</sup> October 2009) to:

- Prioritise education and to seek to protect the sector 'within budgetary constraints' from the 'ravages' of the economic downturn.
- 'Safeguard' the interests of those with special needs
- Take action to attempt to mitigate against the impact of some of the most damaging recent cuts in education expenditure, including provision of extra funding allocations to reinstate particular programmes, recruitment of additional teaching posts to replace a proportion of those lost through cuts, and a commitment to no further increase in the pupil teacher ratio for the lifetime of the current government.

**Recommendation: No further cuts to education services.**

## **Reverse in full decisions taken to increase class size implement national school book rental scheme**

3. Irish national educational policy regarding educational disadvantage has principally focused on targeting resources on schools serving disadvantaged populations. While there are benefits in favour of such an approach, a large proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds attend non-DEIS schools. Survey evidence indicates that, at least in the second level sector, this accounts for over half of disadvantaged young people. School targeting alone cannot therefore address the needs of all children and young people experiencing educational disadvantage.

**Recommendation: Broaden scope for targeting of resources for educational support to non-DEIS schools, according to the number of disadvantaged students in their population.**

4. International research has shown that quality early childhood care and education is crucial in enhancing the later educational and social outcomes of disadvantaged children. To be effective, such services must be of high quality in terms of curriculum offered, standards of care and appropriate training of staff.

The new Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (as prioritised under the Renewed Programme for Government from January 2010), has potential to counter educational disadvantage. However, the scheme should be subject to careful evaluation regarding the extent to which children from disadvantaged backgrounds take part, and on whether all children have access to high quality learning opportunities.

**Recommendation: At Department level, integrate the current childcare and early education policies to improve co-ordination across services.**

**Ensure the universal free half-day pre-school place to all children the year prior to joining primary school (i.e. The Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme) is of a high standard and compliant with the Framework for Quality (SIOLTA) and the Framework of Early Learning (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment).**

## **Undertake an evaluation of the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme**

5. Research indicates that, in order to be effective, education supports should be provided in a timely and sustained way, through a holistic, needs-led and child-centred approach.

Notwithstanding commitments made in the Renewed Programme for Government to:

- Improve the accessibility and availability of identified education support services, such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the National Education and Welfare Board (NEWB)
- Implement the Travellers Education Strategy
- Provide language support in schools

Barnardos believes there is broad scope for further developments in this area.

**Recommendation:**

**Improve access to and collaboration with health care professionals such as child psychologists, speech and language therapists, child and adolescent mental health services, and child welfare services.**

**Make provision for additional supports to assist young people making the transition from primary to secondary school. The success or otherwise of this transition can influence their attendance and success at second level.**

**Ensure continuity of support services between primary and secondary school.**

**Greater investment in school counselling and guidance services**

**Support role of parents in the education of their children, by encouraging the creation of a supportive home education environment.**

**Promote communication between parents and schools, including: improved adult literacy supports, increased language supports for immigrant parents, a comprehensively resourced Home school Liaison Scheme and collaborative approaches with community based family support services.**

**Provide better supports and increased training for school staff working with disadvantaged children and young people, including: working with mixed ability classes to maximise learning potential for all students; promotion of more hands-on learning; impact of poverty and disadvantage on a child's presentation, language development and readiness to learn; inter-cultural awareness; impact of a parent's own school experience and literacy levels on their child's education; special needs/disability; bullying; child welfare/protection and mental health issues.**

6. Inequality within the education system will reflect, and reinforce, inequalities within broader society. As the DEIS pilot phase is to end in 2010, the development of further national education policy must ensure joined-up planning and provision to ensure greater collaboration between all stakeholders, including health, welfare and youth justice services, to achieve improved educational outcomes for disadvantaged children and those with special needs.

This approach acknowledges that the needs of disadvantaged children and young people are multi-dimensional and cannot be addressed by any single agency, department or sector. The commitment made in the Renewed Programme for

Government (10<sup>th</sup> October 2009) to establish a Children's Services Committee in each county by 2016, represents a positive step in this direction. It is also crucial to ensure that schools, which manage to raise the educational outcomes of their students, are not penalised for their success through subsequent reductions in resources.

**Recommendation: Ensure future educational disadvantage policies builds on the progress of DEIS, and guarantees greater collaboration between Government Departments, agencies and communities.**

## References

Barnardos (2009) *Written Out, Written Off – Failure to Invest in Education Deprives Children of their Potential*. Barnardos, Dublin.

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McCoy, S & Smyth, E. (2009) *Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage*. Dublin, ESRI Research Series, Number 6