

**Barnardos' submission on the  
Development of the Intercultural Education Strategy**

28<sup>th</sup> October 2008

**Introduction**

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to input into the drafting of the Intercultural Education Strategy. It is essential that such a strategy be rolled out given the ever increasing diversity of backgrounds, cultures and races of the pupil population. At a national level, it is estimated that 10% of the population is of non-Irish nationality and this is likely to rise into the future. Two other factors emphasising the need for an intercultural education strategy is firstly, that the majority of primary and secondary schools are managed or influenced by the ethos of the Catholic Church despite many migrant pupils being of different religious affiliations. Secondly, any intercultural education strategy must take into account the needs of Traveller children to make the educational system more relevant to them and subsequently decrease the current high drop-out rate among Traveller teenagers.

**Budget 2009**

Barnardos is concerned that any implementation of an Intercultural Education Strategy is already in jeopardy given the announcement of changes in Budget 2009. These cutbacks both individually and collectively will impact negatively on students of all nationalities and will hinder integration of new communities and could even lead to segregation of schools as Irish parents take their children out of schools with a high proportion of foreign national children "because they would fear those with weak English were holding their children back" (English Language Support Teachers Association, 18<sup>th</sup> October 2008).

These cutbacks include:

- Increasing class sizes at primary level from 27 to 28, despite commitments in Programme for Government to decrease the class sizes
- A limit of two language support teachers per school with unspecified additional help being provided for students with a high concentration of foreign pupils.
- Reduction in funding to literacy initiatives such as school libraries and school book funding for children in disadvantaged areas.
- Cessation of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism

**Intercultural Educational Strategy – What's Needed?**

While being conscious of these external factors shaping the education system currently, Barnardos agrees with the proposed principles that would underline the Intercultural Education Strategy. It is imperative that all pupils benefit the most from their education and their aspirations and expectations are respected and encouraged. It has already been highlighted that there is a much higher expectation among immigrant children that they will go on to university (Keogh and Whyte, undated)

Through our work with children and families, we understand and advocate the importance of partnership with families, schools and communities in the interest of

enhancing children's experience of school. The roll out of the strategy must involve all these actors – parents, pupils, teachers, principals and other key personnel in the community.

Barnardos agrees with the proposed actions outlined. Leadership is essential to facilitate full implementation of the strategy. Such leadership must operate at a Ministerial level but also at school level to encourage buy-in and full understanding by all actors. However, leadership is weakened without a commitment of funding and resources to the implementation of the strategy. Already the DEIS strategy appears to be floundering due to limitations of funding.

Awareness raising of the importance of diversity through training of providers is crucial. Barnardos found through our 'Make the Grade – Educational Disadvantage Campaign' (2006) if a child is a member of an ethnic minority such as Travellers or one of the newcomer communities where English or Irish is not their first language, the current teaching methods are not being adapted to these children's needs and the accompanying appropriate resources are also not available.

"The teacher's training does not seem to be up to date especially for those who have been teaching for years, they are unable to cope with the issues facing teenagers today". Mother of five

Barnardos would recommend this cultural training also be given to staff within the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) and the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) as these key front line staff provide vital supports to children. A workforce that better understands their pupil's backgrounds and needs will improve the educational experience that children have and reduce early school leaving. The early school leaving rate has remained constant at 18% despite efforts to tackle it. Off this cohort, Barnardos is particularly concerned about the 1,100 children who fail to transfer into secondary school. Traveller children make up the majority of these children as up to 80% of 12 to 15 year old Traveller children do not attend post primary schools.

Increasing parental involvement is central to a child reaching their potential. Addressing a parent's negative experiences or perceptions of school can lead to increased partnership between parents and schools and in turn raise parental expectations for their children. Different initiatives that have been conducted either in schools or at community level include mentoring programmes and involving parents with their children in English language classes.

Barnardos knows through our work with vulnerable families how beneficial participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) service can be for the children as it prepares them for school, improves their social skills and can assist towards breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. At present, access to quality ECEC services for those on low incomes is quite restricted, thereby limiting the child's school readiness. Access and participation in ECEC services would ease the integration of Traveller children and non-Irish children into the education system.

### **European Union**

Barnardos' sense is that while the EU in general and the Directive 77/486/EEC specifically wish to advance intercultural education in the member states, it is unknown the actual level of influence of the EU on Ireland's Intercultural Education Strategy.

### **Conclusion**

Barnardos welcomes the development of an intercultural education strategy and seeks reassurance of strong leadership and commitment to its full implementation against the backdrop of harsh cutbacks announced in Budget 2009.

**Recommendations:**

- Ensure leadership at national and local level
- Ringfence funding to facilitate full implementation
- Training of teachers and other key actors such as NEWB, NEPS etc.
- Enhance parental involvement at school and community level.
- Improve access to quality pre-school services for all children especially those from migrant communities to ease their integration into the education system.