



Submission to NAPS on Educational Disadvantage

April 2001

Introduction

Even at a time when Ireland is experiencing the highest levels of economic prosperity for many years, educational disadvantage still exists. Young people who leave school at primary level or before obtaining their Junior Certificate suffer lower economic prospects and the potential danger of falling into a poverty trap. The economic boom of the Celtic Tiger has also impacted on the qualifications of students who leave school before obtaining the Leaving Certificate and the lure of part-time work is having a serious impact on the educational outcomes of many students. Government policy to tackle education disadvantage has occurred on a piecemeal basis and many initiatives and schemes have failed to obtain necessary funding to operate strategically. On the issues of educational disadvantage and early school leaving, the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) has established as its overall target:

“To eliminate the problem of ESL before the Junior Certificate and reduce ESL such that the percentage of those completing the senior cycle will increase to at least 90% by the year 2000 and 98% by the year 2007”.

The earlier an individual drops out of formal education, the greater the chances of low employment and economic prospects, which may eventually lead to poverty and increased social exclusion. The following submission examines the issue of Early School Leaving and educational disadvantage, how it is caused, the socio-economic consequences of those who suffer from it, which socio-economic groups are most affected by it, and what policies have been put in place to prevent it.

Background

Early School Leaving can be defined in many different ways. According to the Education (Welfare) Bill, 1999, an Early School Leaver is someone who leaves formal education before the age of 16 or before the completion of three years post-primary education, whichever is the later. An Early School Leaver is still at risk if he or she chooses to leave formal education after the Junior Certificate, especially if their examination performance is poor. This situation becomes even more acute for the

disadvantaged socio-economic groups who are statistically more likely to become Early School Leavers.

Significant factors influencing ESL include:

- Poor school attendance and poor school achievement
- Age variance where a student is older than the rest of his/her classmates
- Poor self-image
- Low motivation and limited family support
- Father's employment record.
- The cost of education, especially for those suffering from multiple disadvantage and the impact of the Social Welfare System

The following findings highlight the socio-economic groupings most at-risk from ESL:

- Almost half of the children who leave school with no qualification are drawn from households whose father is either unemployed or in an unskilled manual occupation. About 33% of children from such backgrounds do not proceed beyond the Junior Certificate.
- ESL is acute among the Travelling community and it is estimated that as many as 75% of Traveller children leave school with no qualification.
- ESL is also heavily concentrated among boys. Two boys leave school for every one girl.

ESL and education disadvantage has the potential to marginalise different social groupings within society, for example, young Travellers, young unskilled men, lone parents, young people in disadvantaged areas, and young people in rural settings. The NYCI believes that a blanket approach to ESL and educational disadvantage is not effective and that recommendations must be targeted to different social groups in different social settings. In other words, steps need to be taken to both combat ESL and educational disadvantage as first principle but also to make provisions within the labour market for these marginalised groups if the formal education sector fails them.

These statistics clearly highlight some interesting characteristics of an Early School

Leaver and the nature of educational disadvantage. The literature on ESL shows that it is an intergenerational phenomenon that affects young people with disadvantaged backgrounds, that it affects a higher proportion of young men than young women, and that it is widespread in the Travelling community. It is clear that any initiative employed to tackle ESL must concentrate on ways to both 'break the cycle' of intergenerational poverty but to also be aware of the cultural sensitivities that may lead to ESL.

The Joint Committee on Education and Science on Early School Leaving (1999) regards the issue of ESL as a very significant problem in Ireland. The committee estimated that 3,200 young people leave school without any qualification and almost 1,000 of these are at primary level. At this point, it is important to highlight that ESL statistics are only estimates because there is no official census conducted to establish the rate of ESL in the Irish school system. In the latter stages of this report, NYCI will reinforce the necessity for a nationwide tracking system to systematically monitor the pathways of potential Early School Leavers.

The problem of ESL and education disadvantage among the Travelling community is particularly acute. Even within the primary system about 16% of Traveller children have dropped out. By the time they reach 15, 80% have dropped out. Overall only 44% of Traveller children aged 12-15 participate in any education. The annual dropout among the Travelling community of children with no qualifications is approximately 500. This small community with no more than 10,000 children of school-going age, representing only little more than 1% of the school-going population, account for 1 in 6 of all unqualified early school leavers. Even with the establishment of high level supports through government funding for the Travelling community, the problem of ESL persists. The NAPS has called for improved measures for Traveller children to ensure that all Travellers school age will be enrolled and will participate fully in primary education within five years. Within ten years, all Traveller children of second-level school-going age will complete junior cycles and 50% will complete senior cycle. There is still some distance to go to achieve this target and extra resources and political will must be extended to achieve this goal.

It is also important to highlight at this point that ESL and poor literacy go hand in hand. Ireland was noted in the OECD's Education at a Glance (2000), as having one of the poorest records on adult literacy; a quarter of all the adult population have limited literacy skills. To this end, the government has increased the Adult Literacy budget from £0.85 million prior to 1997 to £5.665 million in 2000. Nevertheless, this 'second chance' approach to adult literacy must also be matched at both primary and secondary levels. Poor literacy skills have the ability to stigmatise students and therefore impacts on their chances of completing second level education. Remedial education needs to be resourced much more effectively, and at the earliest stages of formal education.

Policy Concerns

Educational Disadvantage has been on the policy agenda for many years. In the most recent Budget 2000, some preventative measures to tackle ESL and educational disadvantage were set out. These measures included an additional £5 million to intensify efforts to ensure that pupils complete their schooling and an additional £0.75 million to give extra grants to address disadvantage in primary schools. While these measures go some way to tackle the problem of ESL, with special attention to early-schooling preventative measures, clarification on the nature and scope of the measures is required. The allocations are an indication of some resolve to tackle educational disadvantage, but the government needs to go much further if real equity is brought to the Irish education system.

Fundamental to the success of any initiatives or schemes tackling ESL and educational disadvantage, is resource allocation. The **NAPS** has set out the national targets for reducing ESL and these must clearly be backed up by sufficient investment at both primary and secondary level. There is an acceptance that achieving the overall targets have been problematic as the retention of pupils to upper second level has remained static at 81% for a number of years compounded more recently by the draw into low paid employment. Serious literacy problems at primary level also remain

stubbornly static for 10% of children with little change since 1980. The **National Development Plan**, which has an overall budget of £40 billion, has allocated £5.35 billion of the total budget to tackling ESL and educational disadvantage. Also included in the National Development Plan is a School Completion Initiative (as part of the ongoing 8-15 Initiative and the Stay in School Retention Scheme Initiative). This initiative, which takes up £75.5 million of the budget, has four strands:

- **Research & Evaluation:** To evaluate models of best practice and research on the early identification of potential school leavers.
- **Tracking:** The development of an integrated database for primary and post-primary pupils to identify pupils at risk of leaving school early
- **Whole School Support:** To target schools with retention rates 10% below the national average that will be required to agree to a programme of action tailored to their particular needs
- **Student Support:** To target pupils at risk of leaving school early, who do not attend that are below the national average.

Other initiatives such as the Early Education Initiative, the Early Literacy Initiative, Traveller Education and the School Guidance Service, are included in the plan. It is imperative that these resources are distributed effectively in the lifespan of the Development Plan. The Department of Education & Science will distribute funds but the approach to eliminating educational disadvantage and ESL must be a co-ordinated one, especially at the local level.

The National Development Plan has also allocated £165.8 million funding over 5 years for **Youth Services**. Included in this allocation is a scheme to allocate grants to special out-of-school projects for disadvantaged young people, facilitating the personal development and social education of youth at risk of drug abuse, juvenile crime, ESL, social exclusion, unemployment, welfare dependence, homelessness and marginalisation. At a policy level, it is important to note that a collaborative approach between the formal education sector and the youth work sector is essential. Without adequately funding the youth work sector, there is a risk that young people, who poorly attend school or have problematic relationships with teachers, can slip through the net. If an inter-agency approach is to be achieved, the youth sector must have an

equal and formalised part to play in combating ESL.

In 1999, the government launched a £194 million plan to tackle educational disadvantage. The plan, called 'The New Deal-A Plan for Educational Opportunity' involves every level of the education system, including pre-school and adult literacy and will also provide the funding for a complete revision of targeted disadvantage funding for schools. Included in the plan is funding for the National Education Welfare Board. Under the 1999 Education (Welfare) Bill, the National Education Welfare Board was established, among others, to:

- Ensure the provision of a prescribed minimum education to each child
- Assist in the formulation and implementation of government policy and objectives concerning the education of children
- Promote and foster in society an appreciation of the benefits to be derived from education
- Promote and foster in schools and environment that encourages children to attend school and participate fully in the life of the school
- Conduct and commission research into the reasons for truancy on the part of students and into strategies and programmes designed to prevent or discourage truancy
- Advise and assist parents of children with school attendance problems
- Assess the adequacy of the training and guidance provided to teachers relating to school attendance matters.

Moreover, provisions are made in the Act to address the situation where young people leave school early with inadequate qualifications in order to enter the workforce. It provides a framework that will ensure that all such young people under 18 years are identified. Once identified, the National Education Welfare Board will assist them to access continuing education and training. Employers will have a role to play in the identification of the young people concerned by employing only young people who have a certificate to show that they are registered with the Board and by informing the Board when they employ a young person. It is essential that this element is enacted as soon as possible and the NYCI has called for more careful monitoring of the Young Persons Employment Act to achieve this goal.

Recommendations

Below are a number of measures and recommendations that the NYCI believe are effective in tackling the issues of ESL and educational disadvantage. By no means is this list exhaustive but highlights priority issues that need to be addressed.

- 1. Review all initiatives targeted to marginalised groups most affected by early school leaving and educational disadvantage. Be aware of the changing nature of educational disadvantage, for example, are the children of refugees and asylum seekers experiencing educational disadvantage? If so, what needs to be done to combat educational disadvantage in this social group? What general lessons can be passed on?**
- 2. The need for a national tracking system is well overdue. The 1999 Education (Welfare) Bill established a National Education Welfare Board to monitor and track young people who are in danger of dropping out of formal education. The Welfare Board has yet to be established and is now in breach of legislation. Traveller organisations have also called for a tracking system to monitor and track the transition of young Travellers from primary to secondary level that has yet to be established.**
- 3. The Irish education system must rectify its poor literacy record. Poor literacy abilities impact on the life-chances of people and lend to future child poverty. The education system is under-resourced across the board, but the lack of resources at pre-primary and primary level is unacceptable. Increased resources must be coupled with increased funding of remedial education and an increased number of remedial teachers.**
- 4. Tackling educational disadvantage through Youth Work is an essential element to an interagency approach. The Youth Work sector has a clear and defined role in enabling young people and children to learn skills, acquire knowledge, and interact with their peers in an informal manner. Such an environment can support young people from all different socio-economic backgrounds who are in danger of dropping out of school. The sector is**

currently inadequately resourced to effectively carry out this role.

- 5. Flexibility at all levels of the education system is required. Not all children are academically minded and this needs to be recognised at the earliest stages of education.**
- 6. The use of breakfast clubs, homework clubs, school lunch programmes have proved successful. In the long-term, if these schemes prove to be an effective measure in combating ESL and educational disadvantage, they must be mainstreamed. In the short-term, wherever possible, provision should be made on a local and community basis. A formal review of the nutritional value of the food offered in these clubs should also be carried out. Furthermore, free school meals and milk should be reinstated in primary and post-primary schools, particularly in disadvantaged/socially excluded communities.**
- 7. The Department of Education & Science must review their definition of ‘free education’. The cost of sending children to school has been spiralling in recent times and more incentives are required to reducing these costs amongst families on lower incomes so that they can afford to retain their children in formal education.**
- 8. More Career Guidance Counsellors are required at both primary and secondary level. Recent evaluations have shown that the ratios of Counsellors to students are wholly inadequate within secondary schools. The use of Guidance Counsellors need to be extended to primary schools and special attention needs to be given to career and schooling advice to socio-economic groups most at risk of ESL and educational disadvantage.**
- 9. Additional funding through local partnerships for educational purposes should be implemented immediately. The over-centralised approach to education is insufficient to tackle the issues surrounding ESL and educational disadvantage. Partnerships have been quite successful in addressing**

problems and concerns at the local level and increased funding must be maintained to address ESL from the bottom, up.

- 10. An Addiction Counsellor should be shared amongst schools in areas where there is a known drug problem. In areas of high economic and social deprivation, drug use can impact on the educational opportunities of many young people and their siblings. In an interagency approach to combating ESL, social workers, Home Liaison officers, addiction counsellors, and guidance counsellors must be made available to all schools as and when they are needed. Increased resources must also be made available to schools to follow-up all cases of drug-use by children in order to get them the necessary support.**
- 11. Special-needs training needs to be reviewed. If necessary, teachers should be given in-house training or extra teachers with special-needs training should be supplied to schools.**
- 12. Positive discrimination is required. In order to achieve an equitable education system, extra rewards need to be distributed to those who are most disadvantaged and marginalised within the system. To this end, a comprehensive and nationwide review of the level of social exclusion in all schools is essential.**
- 13. Child Benefit Allowance needs to be doubled at all ages or in the early years taking the early development of children in all manners into account. Special attention must be given to targeting people on lower incomes and their specific needs.**
- 14. Increase the Back to School Allowance and adjust the Community Employment scheme to ensure lone parents do not miss out on this allowance. Early School Leaving for lone parents is predominantly a young women's issue. All steps need to be taken to ensure that adequate childcare allowances and facilities are offered to lone parents so that they can stay in the education**

system.

- 15. Paying teachers for the supervision of after-school activities must be considered. Many teachers graciously give up their free time after school to supervise an array of extra-curricular activities. It is time that their goodwill is financially recognised and that an incentive scheme is implemented to attract more teachers into giving time to children they believe might be at risk. There is also the potential here to bring teachers, parents and children together after hours to tackle issues of concern that might not be addressed within school hours.**

- 16. A greater number of playgrounds, facilities and activities for young people need to be resourced, especially from the ages of 10 to 18 years, to reduce the dependence on health-damoting activities (for example, underage drinking, ‘hanging around on the street corner’ and the possibility of meeting with bad company). On a wider level, this can lead to the improvement of community spirit and cohesion among the young people of that community.**

- 17. The mandatory minimum leaving age should be increased to 17. Young people would have to remain in education and training until they are at least 17. Types of education and training that would qualify would be:**
 - School (LC/LCA)
 - NCVA- accredited courses (e.g. PLC’s)
 - Third-Level education
 - Apprenticeship schemes
 - FÁS, CERT and other government-supported training opportunities.

- 18. Closer policing of the Young Persons Employment legislation is required by appointing more inspectors. As before, the National Education Welfare Board must be established to assist in this measure.**

- 19. Award a grant/allowance to those young people who have completed the**

Leaving Cert./Leaving Cert. Applied programmes. This would be a sizeable amount- £500- £1000.

20. Every secondary school (or those with at least 200 students) should receive an additional teaching post. Evidence suggests that increased classroom numbers lends itself to truancy, absenteeism, and poor school performance. There is a definite need to reduce the student to teacher ratios throughout the education system.

21. Reform of the senior cycle curriculum (Leaving Cert.) needs to continue. Students should have greater flexibility in choosing which subjects to take, as these decisions can have an important bearing on their future careers. This can be achieved by reducing the number of subjects that students have to take in the Leaving Certificate.

22. In areas of particular educational and socio-economic disadvantage, it may be appropriate to provide additional support in the form of financial incentives for young people to remain in school. However, this should only take place in limited areas and as a direct response to local needs. No national scheme of support should be created.

23. The government should encourage homework clubs in schools throughout the country to use them as a means of supporting students who are finding it difficult to learn. In addition, the government should provide support for these by:

- **Providing funding for schools to pay teachers to stay behind after normal school hours and work with Homework clubs. If schools are unable to accommodate the clubs, then arrangements should be made for them to use local community centres.**
- **Providing funding to cover the cost of insurance for school/community centres to host homework clubs**
- **Involve parents and others in the community in the running of homework clubs. For example, youth workers and youth clubs could link in closely**

with homework clubs and provide additional support. There could be a role for the Youth Service in supporting these.

- **Encourage third level students to act as tutors in homework clubs. Credit could be given to third level students involved in this way.**

- 24. Review the issue of rolling suspensions, particularly in areas of high economic and social disadvantage. Is there a need for a nationwide tracking system of suspension to monitor the underlying reasons as to why disruptive students continue to be suspended and how their specific needs can be addressed?**
- 25. There is an immediate need to look at the issue as to why low ability girls who complete second level schooling participate less frequently in the labour market than low ability boys who leave school early.**
- 26. Review the issue of bullying at school and how it impacts on the educational opportunities of students who are considered to be marginalised in the system. Demand the introduction of the CSPE (Civic, Social and Personal Education) at primary level due to the fact that discriminatory attitudes and opinions can already be formed at this stage.**
- 27. Bonus payments should be paid to teachers with the relevant qualifications to teach in schools designated to be disadvantaged in light of the fact that schools deemed to be disadvantaged are finding it difficult to recruit experienced teachers. All teachers should be offered training in how to deal with diversity, racism, and difference amongst school students.**
- 28. Students who are in danger of dropping out of the formal education system need to be listened to. All initiatives implemented to combat educational disadvantage and Early School Leaving must learn from the student voice. The NYCI welcomes the establishment of student councils in a majority of second-level schools and supports the establishment of the Union of**

**Secondary Students (USS) as an essential partner in the education system.
All efforts need to be made by the Department of Education and individual
schools to create an environment where the student voice is considered.**

Key Issues

- Targeting
- Monitoring
- Local initiatives
- Partnerships
- Interagency approach
- Youth organisations
- Incentives
- Lessening the gender gap
- Curriculum Reform
- Rural perspective
- Travellers
- Diversity