



Education Policy 2007 - 2010

National Youth Council of Ireland

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Introduction

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for voluntary youth organisations in Ireland.

NYCI functions to represent the interests of young people and youth organisations. NYCI's role is recognised in legislation (Youth Work Act) and as a Social Partner. The NYCI aims through its member organisations and its representative role to empower young people to participate in society as fulfilled confident individuals. The work of the Youth Council is based on principles of equality, social justice and equal participation for all. In achieving these aims the NYCI seeks the emergence of a society in which young people are valued citizens who can make a meaningful contribution to their community.

Background

NYCI has undertaken considerable work in the area of formal and non formal education. NYCI has contributed to a wide range of key education bodies, including the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, the National Education Welfare Board, the Education Disadvantage Committee, the Action Group on Third Level Access and the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning. The Council is also represented on the National Advisory Committee on Youth Work.

Rationale

Equality of Access to education and lifelong/lifewide learning are integral to the creation of an education system that is equitable and fully inclusive. The development of an education system which is attainable to all throughout the lifecycle is vitally important in addressing poverty and social exclusion and breaking the intergenerational cycle of educational disadvantage.

Furthermore there has been substantial research conducted to confirm that high levels of investment in education, and particularly investment in early education, will lead to improved economic performance, increased social inclusion, lower crime, reduced welfare dependence, and better health.

The Context:

Investment in Education

The most recent OECD report "Education at a Glance" highlighted the fact that the level of investment in education in Ireland was still below the average in other western countries. The report indicated that Ireland's expenditure in education had actually decreased from 5% of GDP in 1995 to 4.7% in 2004, which is well below the OECD average of 5.4%. The Programme for Government, however commits the spending of an additional €350m per annum on new service developments in education.

The Education (Welfare) Act 2000

The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 provided for the establishment of the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB). The NEWB was established to develop, co-ordinate and implement school attendance policies to ensure that every child in the State attends a recognised school or otherwise receives an appropriate education.

“Towards 2016”

The overarching framework which dictates public policy on education over the next 10 years is the current **Social Partnership Agreement – “Towards 2016.”** The agreement represents significant outcomes for children and youth people, and in the context of education, makes commitments to developing capacity in youth work, and to combating educational disadvantage.

Existing under this framework is the **DEIS Strategy** (*Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools - An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion*) 2005 which is currently being rolled out.

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools...

In 2005 the Department of Education & Science published “DEIS” (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools). DEIS is an Action Plan for Educational Inclusion. DEIS acknowledges the necessity to address educational disadvantage but focuses largely on investment in the formal education system to achieve this objective. The plan invests resources at primary and post primary level to target the young people most susceptible to early school leaving. In this respect it provides a school focused action plan to address the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through to second level.

DEIS acknowledges the important role education has to play in the development of every single child, and offers an ambitious strategy to address many of the problems causing educational disadvantage. Its core objective is to intervene in a cycle of deprivation by providing a systematic, integrated strategy to address educational disadvantage.

The action plan sets out a five year implementation period and provides for a new School Support Programme (SSP). The School Completion Programme and Home School Community Liaison Scheme which directly challenge educational disadvantage will be integrated into the new SSP over this period.

While we acknowledge the plan and feel that, if fully implemented in a coordinated manner, will contribute to tackling educational disadvantage, more work needs to be done to link what happens in schools with the wider community and society.

It is vital that the new School Support programme is adequately resourced to ensure it is rolled out fully and that valuable programmes such as the SCP and HSCL scheme are given immediate support within the new SSP and expanded to operate in all designated disadvantaged areas.

This Position Paper

This position paper focuses specifically on 7 key education issues of relevant to NYCI, namely:

- Youth Work,
- Early School Leaving,
- Class Sizes
- Literacy,
- Lifelong Learning Strategies
- Young People as partners in Education
- Arts and Education

NYCI aims to achieve these policy objectives over the lifetime of the next NYCI Strategic Plan - 2007 – 2012.

Key Issues

Youth Work

Youth Work represents huge value for money and makes a vital contribution to the education of our young people. By giving young people the opportunity to participate in a range of non-formal, but structured activities, Youth Work fosters the social and personal skills that young people need to face key challenges in the transition from childhood to adulthood. More than 50 Youth Organisations operate in Ireland run by a combination of paid staff and volunteer leaders. Currently the ratio is some 1,000 paid staff to 40,000 volunteers.

Whilst NYCI recognises the improved allocations made over the last 4 years, these very much addressed the ongoing deficit that had built up due to lack of investment over a number of years. This has been very much a “catch up” process and despite this investment, the sector remains under-funded in comparison to voluntary youth sectors in other European countries. Comparison can be made with the UK where the lowest local authority funding is in the region of £60m (€90m equivalent), a difference of some €50m to Ireland’s budget allocation on a national basis. Furthermore it is only since 2007 that the allocation included a strategic commitment to provide increases in organisational core funding.

It remains a concern that the current process of funding provision to Youth Affairs still operates on an ad hoc basis. The lack of a sustained funding mechanism means that organisations in the youth sector are unable to develop medium term plans to build capacity. The Government must commit to an incremental funding structure for the youth work sector to enable capacity and development planning to take place.

Issues relating to the implementation of the Youth Work Act and Development Plan are still outstanding. The current plan due to be completed in 2007 still has a number of key priorities not implemented.

It is vital that Government continue to invest incrementally in the Youth Work sector by committing to increasing funding for the youth work sector by €10m per annum over the next 5 years.

The current Social Partnership agreement guarantees that further resources will be provided to progress implementation of the National Youth Work Development Plan and the Youth Work Act 2001. A commitment is also made to review the Plan with a view to developing its successor.

Recommendations:

- Implement the funding review of the sector and establish a structured funding mechanism that recognises the core funding needs of organisations.
- Provide the resources necessary to deliver on the commitment in the NDP and the Programme for Government to develop a successor to the National Youth Work Development Plan for the period 2008 – 2012.
- Allocate an additional €10m per annum to the youth work sector to continue the implementation of key agreed priorities of both the Youth Work Act 2001 and the National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-2007.

Early School Leaving

Ireland's level of early school leaving remains high and unabated, will contribute to ongoing social and economic problems in the years ahead. Despite Government policy focusing strongly on addressing educational disadvantage and early school leaving over the years, a significant proportion of young people continue to leave upper second level without a qualification. Indeed there is evidence to suggest that up to 1,000 young people fail to make the transition from primary school to secondary school.

Under the current Social Partnership Agreement, Government have pledged to reduce early school leaving by 10% by 2010. The national agreement makes a commitment to provide additional resources to provide 100 extra staff to be appointed between the NEWB and NEPS by 2009. The work of the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) is vital in tackling school absenteeism and early school leaving.

Last year, Budget 2007 provided a 20% increase in the funding for the NEWB to appoint an additional 20 staff in 2007. It is vital that funding to allocated in 2008 to appoint a further 20 EWO's and 10 EWO's in 2009.

The high costs associated with educational participation can contribute significantly to educational disadvantage. The Combat Poverty Agency's study *Against All Odds* (2002) highlighted the impact of high educational participation costs on a child's ability to remain in school; Bank of Ireland Life estimated that the annual cost of sending a child to primary school is €500, and to secondary school €800.¹ Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA), the social welfare payment designed to support families with such costs, has seen increases in recent years. However, many lone parents fail to qualify for the payment as a much lower income threshold is used to determine their eligibility, and so have been unable to benefit from these increases.

¹ Irish Times, 10th August 2007

To support low income families with the costs associated with school, to reduce educational disadvantage and counter early school leaving, NYCI believes that the level of BSCFA payment should be raised to €250 for primary school children and to €350 for secondary school children. The Youth Council also calls on Government to use the Family Income Supplement means assessment to determining eligibility for BSCFA i.e., use the same FIS threshold for both two-parent and one-parent families, and assess income net of tax and PRSI.

Recommendations:

- Government to honour its commitment to reduce early school leaving by 10% by 2010.
- Government to provide funding to ensure that the NEWB is fully resourced in line with “Towards 2016” by 2009.
- Raise the level of the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance payment to €250 for primary school children, and to €350 for secondary school children.
- Use the Family Income Supplement means assessment to determine eligibility for Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance i.e. use the same FIS threshold for both two –parent and one-parent families, and assess income net of tax and PRSI.

Class Sizes

Despite increased investment in education, large class sizes continue to be a major problem in Ireland. There are currently 100,000 children in primary schools and 35,000 young people in secondary schools being taught in class sizes of 30 or more. Ireland currently has the second largest class sizes in the European Union. Based on data compiled by the OECD for the school year 2003, the average primary class in Ireland has 24.3 pupils compared with an average of 21.7 in 31 OECD countries, and an EU average of 20.3.

The impact of large class sizes on children and young people can be significant, particularly for children with special needs who require additional support. A large class size may mean the teacher has less time to identify special needs within the class or that children with special needs may not be given the attention they require. It also means that teachers are under tremendous pressure to give individual attention to students, to hold the attention of the entire class, and to cover the syllabus. In effect this means the teacher is under pressure to address all the needs of children within his/her class equally.

The current coalition has committed in the Programme for Government to increase the number of teachers by 4,000 with the aim of reducing the average teacher per pupil ratio to 27 in 2007/2008 and to 24 by 2010/2011. There is also a commitment in “Towards 2016” to addressing disadvantage by reducing junior class sizes to 20 pupils per teacher and senior classes to 24 pupils in urban/town primary schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage.

Recommendation:

- Government to increase investment to reduce class sizes and fulfil its commitments in “Towards 2016” and the Programme for Government in this regard.

Literacy

In 1997 the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), revealed that a quarter of the Irish population had the lowest level of literacy. More recently, a report prepared for the Department of Education in 2004 on literacy standards in disadvantaged primary schools shows more than 30 per cent of children suffer from severe literacy problems (Eivers et al, 2004).

Literacy is a very significant problem in Ireland for children and adults alike and much more needs to be done to invest in services to address child and adult illiteracy. Government needs to substantially increase the resources being provided to organisations working on this issue, and to the implementation of the next phase of the Adult Literacy Plan.

In order to break the cycle of educational disadvantage it is essential that resources are invested in adult literacy services to improve adult literacy, particularly for parents with low literacy levels.

‘Towards 2016’ references its support of the NAPS Incl 2007-2016 and the various actions and targets identified. NAPS Incl 2007-2016 has set a target to reduce the proportion of the population aged between 16 and 64, with restricted literacy to between 10%-15% by 2016. The current target, which Government has set is not ambitious enough and fails to address the extent of the problem.

Furthermore there is an urgent need for a clear policy on English language services, such as ‘English for Speakers of Other Language’ (ESOL), to meet the needs of migrant workers as well as asylum seekers and refugees and their families, especially for those with less than Level 4 qualifications. The allocation of investment in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) service provision separate to current adult literacy budgets is also required.

Towards 2016 makes commitment to focus on adult literacy, and on ESOL provision for migrants by increasing the national literacy service provision by the Vocational Education Committees by an extra 7000 places by 2009, and increasing the number of migrants receiving an ESOL service provision. There is the provision of family literacy projects under the DEIS Strategy but an evaluation of such projects is yet to be conducted.

Recommendations:

- Government needs to substantially increase the resources being provided to organisations working on this issue, and to the implementation of the next phase of the Adult Literacy Plan.
- Develop a policy on English language services to meet the needs of young migrant workers as well as asylum seekers and refugees, especially those with less than Level 4 qualifications.

- Allocate a budget specifically for ESOL service provision separate to current adult literacy budgets.

Lifelong Learning Strategies

In an ever changing labour market, employees must be able to up-skill and retrain to ensure their employability. Second chance learners also need to return to education to attain the skills and qualifications to be able to access and engage fully in the labour market. Therefore the prevalence of an education system which accommodates the needs of such learners is paramount.

The concept of lifelong/lifewide learning is becoming increasingly important. Learning lifelong policies must meet the needs of learners at every stage of the education process to provide an effective system of education. It must be flexible and adopt mechanisms to ensure that young people at risk of early school leaving, early school leavers, Travellers, young people with learning difficulties and young people trying to access second chance and third level educational opportunities are encouraged and assisted in their educational endeavours.

Part-time Fees

Accessing education is an expensive commodity. Funding is provided for full-time students undertaking primary degrees, diplomas, certificate courses and FAS courses but not for those undertaking part-time courses. Very often part-time study is the only viable option for someone with work and family responsibilities; however a disincentive exists in that they are subject to tuition fees.

Given the anomaly that exists between full-time students and part-time students in respect of tuition fees, we believe that more financial supports should be provided for part-time students to engage in education and learning. The introduction of a grant in lieu of the fees scheme for part-time students studying in publicly funded further and higher education and training institutions as recommended in the Report of the Taskforce in Lifelong Learning 2002 and the removal of part-time fees would serve to promote lifelong by removing barriers to access and participation.

Under the current Social Partnership Agreement, there is a commitment to establish a targeted fund to alleviate part-time fees for employees attending public institutions for part-time courses at third level by those at work who have never previously pursued a third level qualification (Towards 2016, 2006: 88). NYCI believe this measure, will go some way towards improving access to higher education and promote lifelong learning opportunities through this targeted measure.

Statutory Learning Leave

Another disincentive to participation in training and educational courses for those in full-time employment is the time commitment. Many employees already experience difficulty reconciling work and family life and therefore without allocated work time would not be able to dedicate to further study. Some employers provide learning leave to facilitate study leave and exam time for approved courses and/or provide schemes to refund fees for employees undertaking learning which is relevant to their work area.

Without the time and the resources to engage in further learning, lifelong learning for many is not feasible. Therefore NYCI believes that we need to make it much easier for people in the workplace to access opportunities for learning through the provision of supports such as guaranteed time off for education and training. The introduction of Paid Learning Leave would remove the disincentive to education of employees and encourage lifelong learning. It would also have the dual affect of benefiting both the employee and the employer. The employee would benefit from free access to education and an employer, would gain a highly skilled workforce.

In order for lifelong learning to become a reality in Irish society, employers need to work with the State to ensure that employees are given the opportunities to up-skill and learn throughout their working lives. The benefits of such an investment for the economy at large would be tremendous and would ensure cost effectiveness.

Recommendations:

- Ensure Government honours its commitment in “Towards 2016 and in the current Programme for Government to establish a fund to alleviate part-time fees for employees attending public institutions who have never pursued third level education before.
- A new initiative should be established providing a systematic approach to paid statutory educational leave, with a particular focus on supporting those with low educational qualifications and low skilled workers to access education.

Young People as Partners in Education:

School is not only a place where young people spend a considerable proportion of their lives and where they undertake a formal educational programme; it is also a place where many of their views and perspectives on life are shaped. Therefore it is essential that young people learn about participation and democracy while in school and in that context we welcome the development and roll out of the CPSE course at secondary level. However school must also be a place where young people experience democracy in action and where their participation in decision-making is supported, promoted and is seen as valuable. The 1998 Education Act provides for the establishment of student councils in schools to facilitate the involvement of young people in the affairs of schools in partnership with management and staff. While student councils have been established in a significant number of schools, many schools still do not have student councils. Furthermore there is inconsistency in terms of the nature, scope and decision-making role Student Councils play in schools throughout the country.

A working group established by the Minister for Children, Brian Lenihan T.D. recommended in 2005 the establishment of a support service on a pilot basis for three years led by the Department of Education and Science to develop, promote and support student councils in partnership with young people. To date this recommendation has not been progressed. NYCI believes that the establishment of such a support service would greatly assist existing student councils and support the establishment of new student councils. It was estimated at the time that such a proposal would cost €400,000 per annum.

Recommendation:

- Government fund the establishment of a support service on a three year pilot basis as recommended in the Student Council Working Group to develop, support and promote student councils in all second level schools in the state.

Arts and Education:

The White Paper Charting our Education Future (1995) emphasised a central role for the arts in the curriculum stating:

“The Government affirms the centrality of the arts within education policy and provision, particularly during compulsory schooling (up to age 16)...artistic and aesthetic education are key elements within the school experience of the young...a good arts education develops the imagination, as a central source of human creativity, and fosters important kinds of thinking and problem solving, as well as offering opportunities to symbolise, to play and to celebrate.”

The Department of Education policy on school planning allows individual schools the opportunity to incorporate the arts as an integral dimension of school life. While schools are better positioned now to promote and support arts in education, a lot more needs to be done to ensure arts is properly integrating into schools as part of a holistic education system.

With this in mind the Government established a Special Committee on Arts and Education under the auspices of The Arts Council in September 2006. This committee has now completed its work and has presented a report to the Arts Council. In order to progress this important issue, it is vital that this report is published and adopted by the Government and that the relevant Government Departments, (the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism, and Education and Science) implement its findings.

Recommendation:

- Government to publish and adopt report of Special Committee on Arts and Education and implements its recommendations.

Policy Recommendations

Youth Work

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For further information on this submission and NYCI’s work in this area, contact:

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