

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland**

**Draft Response to Consultation on Department of Children and Youth Affairs Statement of Strategy 2015-2017**

**(October 2014)**

TUI represents teachers (10,000+) employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and in Community and Comprehensive (C&C) Schools. Following a request for submission on a Statement of Strategy 2015-2017 for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), TUI respectfully makes the enclosed points. TUI restricts this submission to education and youth issues and does not propose to comment on other aspects of the work or internal processes of the DCYA.

Child and Youth Centred

TUI welcomes the child and youth centred approach demonstrated by the establishment and ongoing work of the DCYA. The mission of the DCYA “is to lead the effort to improve outcomes for children and young people in Ireland” (DCYA, 2012: 2). Such a child/youth centred approach must be supported by adequate resources. Ireland has a very young population. In 2008, we had the second highest proportion of 10-14 year olds in the European Union (CSO, 2009). The high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2014) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future. DES (2014) suggests that the number of students in the primary school system will rise by 30,000 by 2019 and by 67,000 in second level by 2026. In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world-class child/youth centred society can be achieved with inadequate resources of time, money or personnel. The budget currently available is inadequate to meet need so it is vital that the new strategy not be funded “within existing (inadequate) resources”.

OECD (2014) shows that the Irish education system is competing successfully internationally, though it should be borne in mind that raw statistical data cannot adequately measure the breadth of events and experiences that are an everyday part of a holistic education system. The success of the education system, for example in ensuring that 90% of students complete Senior Cycle (DES, 2012), comes in the context of significant cutbacks in the education system especially in pastoral supports such as middle management (e.g. year head) and guidance posts. Perhaps the most important measure of the success of the education system is that parents have expressed satisfaction with the way teachers do their jobs (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2013) and that students, especially girls, reported liking school (OECD, 2009).

The previous paragraph made reference to cuts affecting pastoral systems in schools. The work of DCYA is closely associated with creating a child/youth-centred system for the modern age. Bullying is a serious difficulty experienced by many young people (Gleeson, 2014; Barnardos, 2008; Lodge and Lynch, 2004; Downes and Gilligan, 2007). Cyberbullying has become the latest manifestation of bullying but is perhaps even more insidious as the victim can never really ‘switch off’ due to the pervasiveness of technology in the life of a young person. Young people must be protected to the greatest extent possible and hence it is essential that DCYA encourages all Government departments and agencies to support schools and youth groups through provision of expertise and resources to limit the spread of cyberbullying in schools/youth spaces. Furthermore, parents must be supported in taking on their responsibilities in regard to preventing cyberbullying in the time young people spend outside of schools. Young people spend only a small proportion of their childhoods in school settings so the main focus in terms of preventing cyberbullying must logically and necessarily be on out-of-school settings.

No child-centred model can be achieved to any appreciable extent without dealing with the relative poverty in which many children and their families live. Almost 20% of children are at risk of poverty and almost 10% live in consistent poverty (NERI, 2013). How we treat children is a key measure of how we as a society can be measured. It is perverse and unacceptable that in a first world country our members regularly see students come to school cold or hungry due to lack of money at home, or excessively tired due to having to work in or outside of the home in caring duties or paid employment, respectively. Schools do what they can, with the support of initiatives such as School Completion (where available), by providing breakfast clubs and other assistive interventions but the problem shouldn’t exist in the first place. The social welfare system must ensure that families are given the protections necessary to ensure that parents can both meet the basic needs of their children and protect each child’s time in and capacity to derive full benefit from the public education system. In the meantime, it is essential that funding available to all schools such as the capitation grant, as well as funding aimed especially at DEIS schools, continue at least at the current level as adjusted for inflation. DEIS is working (ERC, 2014) and should continue to be funded at least at the current rate. It must however also be borne in mind that 56-61% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attend non-DEIS schools (Barnardos, 2009) so the needs of those schools also must be recognised.

Research

The Research Unit can play a vital role in commissioning, analysing and disseminating research. TUI would welcome additional research into the lives of children and youth. Such research, however, must take account of the administrative burden involved and the data protection issues arising. DCYA need to be adequately resourced if this is to be successful.

Early Years Education

It is regrettable that the recent Budget did not extend pre-school provision beyond the ‘free pre-school year’. Studies (as outlined in Connolly, 2009; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013; NESF, 2005) have clearly shown that investment in early childhood care and education (ECCE) yields returns of the order of 2.5-16 times the sum invested. This has a significant impact on the child, family and, in later years, on the education system and, indeed, society as a whole.

Child Protection

The last twenty years in Ireland have seen a dramatic change in the priority attached to child protection. The Vetting Unit of An Garda Síochána plays a key role in this. It is important that sufficient resources be provided to An Garda Síochána/National Vetting Bureau to ensure that its vital work can be discharged effectively. It is also essential that adequate protection be given to ‘unaccompanied minors’ who are particularly vulnerable in our society.

Economic Recovery

The economic benefit of ECCE was outlined above. The wider education system also yields dramatic economic returns. For example, OECD (2014) shows that public investment in education yields an Internal Rate of Return of up to thirty percent. Furthermore, OECD (2010) shows the economic and societal benefit of investment in education, especially in the areas of better mental health and reduced crime. KPMG Foundation (2006) found that the total costs to the taxpayer of failing to learn to read amounted to stg£44,797-£53,098 per individual. McGilloway et al. (2012) found that early intervention and improvements in child behaviour resulted in reduced use of support services such as social services and speech and language and hence to savings of €4,021-€4,824 per child over a ten year period.

Existing Underinvestment

TUI is aware of underinvestment in a number of agencies which are vital to the creation and maintenance of a child-centred society. It is essential that DCYA exercises all the powers available to it to cajole, encourage and, if necessary, coerce other Government departments into providing the necessary resources to agencies within their remit. For example, the DES Inspectorate is down approximately forty staff on its levels previously (DES, 2014). NEPS (now part of TUSLA) is suffering from a shortage of staff (source: scotens.org/category/4-sen/people-roles/educational-psychologist). Speech and language therapists have reported shortages of staffing and resulting waiting lists (source: Irish Times, September 22nd, 2014). There is also a shortage of social workers (source: Irish Times, September 5th, 2014). While TUI does not have information regarding the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, it is essential that no staffing shortage be allowed to arise there.

Students in Need

The attrition affecting guidance counselling services in schools, since the withdrawal of the ex-quota allocation, has had a dramatic impact on supports available to students experiencing additional needs. Surveys carried out by TUI, ASTI, The Institute of Guidance Counsellors and the National Centre for Guidance in Education have all shown the difficulties which have arisen. Perhaps the single worst impact is the reduction of provision of one-to-one guidance/counselling support. McCoy et al. (2014) found that one-to-one sessions were essential to students but often not available even before the cut in the ex-quota allocation. DCYA should address this issue with other Governments departments and agencies, in order to protect students in need. The under-resourcing of schools generally also limits the ability of schools to adequately meet the needs of children with special educational needs.

Conclusion

TUI is available to participate in face to face dialogue in order to develop the above points in more detail should you wish to do so.

**Ends**

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**To be emailed to** **dcyastrategy@dcya.gov.ie** **by Oct 28th**

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