

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland**

**Response to TUSLA Corporate Plan**

**(September 2014)**

TUI represents teachers (10,000+) employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and in Community and Comprehensive (C&C) Schools. Our members daily support students who may be experiencing a range of difficulties that also means that the students and their families come into contact with services provided by TUSLA. We support the work that TUSLA is doing but must express our concern that adequate resources are required to enable TUSLA to carry out its work. TUI sets out below the answers to the questions posed but suggests that some of the questions are not as relevant to TUI as they may perhaps be to other service organisations.

**Guide Questions**

**1. Understanding:**

•        What is your understanding of TUSLA’s role and how it fits into the wider system?

TUSLA has a vital role to play in supporting families and children. The work of TUSLA in areas such as family support, psychological services, welfare and protection of children, undertaking research and providing education welfare services is of direct relevance to children and families. Such families may be in difficulty in multiple ways and require expert support. Schools are often the first point at which the need for additional support becomes known. Schools often had difficulty in accessing support for children and families when the needs of children exceed that which can be dealt with in school. The expertise of TUSLA is vital in these cases but it is also vital that TUSLA be adequately resourced to meet those needs.

**2.  Priorities:**

•        In your opinion what should TUSLA’s priorities be, given its role and mandate?

TUI will focus here on needs arising from the education system as other organisations will no doubt address issues of health and community. The area of greatest concern to TUI is the need to provide an adequately resourced service in education welfare services, home school links and educational psychological services. Our colleagues in those fields provide an essential service to schools.

The education welfare service do very important work in ensuring that students have access to school and also that students attend school. Excellent work is done by schools in encouraging parents to ensure that their children attend school frequently. However, in some cases students can miss a lot of time in schools and the issue becomes so serious that it cannot be addressed entirely by schools. At that stage the services of TUSLA become an essential link to support families in countering poor school attendance by their children. School completion rates have increased in Ireland to over 90% which is one of the highest rates in the OECD. Much of the credit for that improvement is due to services such as School Completion and it is important that those services continue and are adequately resources.

Schools do excellent work in creating links with families and the local community. Disadvantaged communities present particular difficulties as some parents can be very reluctant to engage with schools despite the best efforts of schools. There are many reasons why this may happen but the outcome is the same – families detached from what their children are doing in school. The work of home school and community liaison officers is vital in supporting parents to engage with the school their child attends.

The work of educational psychologists provides essential support to schools and their students in diagnosing difficulties and addressing those difficulties. Psychologists and counsellors also do important work in dealing with critical incidents. Thankfully those incidents are quite rare in Ireland but when they do happen they can have profound impacts on the entire community. Schools often become ‘ground zero’ in such cases but the incident can be of such profound impact that it would overwhelm the resources of schools. The support of TUSLA is essential in such cases. It is most unfortunate that cutbacks to guidance services in schools over recent years has reduced the ability of schools to provide one-to-one support to students as such one-to-one sessions can prevent a lot of difficulties that would otherwise have to be addressed by psychological services. Furthermore, those same one-to-one meetings with qualified guidance counsellors can also be a vital gateway into psychological services, identifying underlying difficulties that could then require intervention by psychologists. It appears that there is a significant shortage in the numbers of educational psychologists in post. The Department of Education and Skills ‘brief for the information of the minister for Education and Skills – July 2014’ points out that the Employment Control Framework has capped the number of posts at 173 but that there had been a previous commitment of 210.

•        How do these fit with your organisation’s strategic priorities?

The provision of an excellent education system and the support of our members is a strategic priority for TUI. Support for our students and their families of course is essential to the provision of an excellent education service. However, provision of such excellence also requires the provision of resources. If the services provided by TUSLA are underfunded, then it is not possible for TUSLA to provide the services and expertise which schools need. As a result, schools could be left trying to apply ‘sticking plaster’ solutions on gaping societal wounds. Our members and our students deserve better.

**3. Change and Reform:**

•        What are the 4-5 service delivery issues you would like to see TUSLA progress in the next 3 years?

As outlined above, the services of TUSLA extend far beyond the education sector so the delivery issues relevant to education may be only part of the overall scene for TUSLA. However, within that proviso the key delivery issues for TUI are that there be adequate resourcing of services such as family support, psychological services, welfare and protection of children, undertaking research and providing education welfare services.

•        What advice would you give TUSLA in implementing the changes necessary to achieving these?

TUI would advise that any changes be implemented with full consultation with stakeholders and that adequate funding be provided to TUSLA that it can carry out its important work without raising expectations and then dashing same due to an inability to meet the needs that arise.

•        How do you see your organisation aligning its work and outcomes with TUSLA's priorities?

TUI already has formal links with TUSLA and our members engage engage with TUSLA staff in many different ways. For example, guidance counsellors, year heads and principal teachers frequently discuss issues with local TUSLA staff whilst home school officers operate out of schools.

**4. Working Together:**

•        What conditions need to be put in place for your organisation to work in a mutually beneficial way with TUSLA going forward?

Given the answer to section 3, TUI doesn’t see ‘conditions’ being put on our work with TUSLA. We do however again state the need for adequate funding to be provided to TUSLA.

•        Given that TUSLA has a national brief, how can interfaces and commissioning processes with provider organisations be streamlined to avoid unnecessary duplication or bureaucracy?

TUI doesn’t see a great need to amend existing formal consultation processes which we have engaged in with TUSLA and will continue to do so. Of course communication is important and we are happy to discuss matters on a formal basis with TUSLA at any time should issues arise. The bigger issue here is that our members need to see that communication processes within TUSLA work effectively for the sake of children and their families. It is also essential that schools be able to contact TUSLA staff as required in order to meet any difficulties that arise at school level. TUSLA staff work very hard and provide the best service they can to schools. However, those same staff must have sufficient resources available to them to enable them to support schools.

**5. Wicked Issues**

•        What new approaches would you like to see TUSLA apply to tackling entrenched problems what impact on children and young people in Ireland?

A person recently said to the author of this submission that “happy children learn”. Any work that TUSLA can do to identify problems in children in need, or their families, and to resolve those problems enables schools to do their job better. Thankfully most students and their families will never need the services of TUSLA. However, for students with special needs or for families in crisis situations TUSLA represents an essential support system that needs to be adequately planned and funded.

The union 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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