



Early Years & School-Age Care and Education

IPPN Position Paper

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1. BACKGROUND

IPPN is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. It is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education as an official Education Partner, IPPN works with the DES, the National Parents' Council, management bodies, unions, education agencies, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,600 Principals and Deputy Principals.

Early Years and School-Age Care and Education is an investment in our children's future. Supporting children's early cognitive, emotional, social, physical and language development generates significant long-term returns to both society and State. Investing in Early Years Care and Education is important, not least in terms of increased standards in literacy and numeracy, but also in terms of employment prospects and future contribution to society. Such investment manifests itself in lower crime rates, fewer social interventions and greater civic contributions.

Research indicates that children benefit most from parental care in their first year. Provision must therefore be made in future years for the creation of an environment where parents are enabled to develop strong relationships during the child's critical first year. Currently, 62% of children below one year of age are cared for at home by a parent.

There is also strong evidence to suggest that once a child has passed the age of two years he/she will develop more fully in a high-quality Care and Education setting rather than remaining at home. This is particularly true of children who come from a disadvantaged background or have complex needs.

2. CONTEXT

The Irish government currently allocates in the region of €260 million annually to three support programmes that enable parents of pre-school and primary school children to access affordable childhood care and education. These programmes include the ECCE free pre-school year, the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme and the Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) programme. All of these initiatives are funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

In 2014, there were an estimated 436,000 children aged between 0 and 5 years and 458,000 children aged between 6 years and 12 years in the 26 counties. Close to one in five of these children lived in a one parent household while one in twenty had a disability. It is also estimated that 15% of this cohort of children were considered to be at risk of food poverty (*Growing up in Ireland*, ESRI, 2014). From an educational perspective, these figures will present considerable challenges to educationalists in the coming years and there is a need for extensive planning in the area of early years' education so that none of these children or their families are short-changed.

There are currently approximately 4,650 early-years settings in the 26 counties (Pobal, 2014). These settings are comprised mainly of crèches and pre-schools. Most of the pre-schools (73%) are independently managed and owned while 13% are located on a primary school campus. Over the next 5 years, some 35,000 extra places will be required in early-years settings and subsequently in primary schools. This equates to the provision of 83 additional 16-classroom primary schools nationwide.

3. THE ISSUE

IPPN believes equity must be at the heart of future provision, whereby children from homes with low levels of education stimulus and social disadvantage have similar opportunities and readiness to engage in education as their peers.

The current landscape allows for an ad-hoc approach to early years' education. While the system has become much more regulated since 2006, there are still issues in relation to staffing, multiple inspections from different agencies, child protection and health and safety which must be addressed. In particular, there is an urgent need to regulate after school provision as there is currently no coherent policy in the area.

IPPN is aware that moves are afoot in relation to the co-location of early years' services in primary schools. While this will inevitably result in the displacement of existing services, IPPN advises that, initially, such displacement should be on a voluntary basis until a policy document, agreed by all stake holders is in place.

Co-location offers some discreet advantages. Children are likely to find transition to mainstream less stressful due to the familiarity factor. Parents find it more convenient and have an opportunity to establish an early relationship with the whole-school community while pre-school children have intermittent opportunities to integrate with Junior Infant classes. Issues such as the footprint of the school site and traffic management issues must be factored into future deliberations.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are IPPN's key recommendations in relation to Early Years Care and Education:

Children with Additional Needs

Improved outcomes for children, especially those with special needs, must be prioritised in any recalibration of early years' provision. Currently, there is a yawning gap in service provision with many children having clearly identifiable needs receiving no supports at pre-school level. As transition to mainstream has been consistently identified as a traumatic experience for many of these children (Margetts, 2001), (Peters, 2003), it is highly advisable that these children have access to intervention services at the earliest possible opportunity.

The Inter-Departmental Report on Inclusion in Early Years, was launched in December 2015 and recommends that seven levels of support must be implemented by the beginning of the 2016-2017 pre-school year. IPPN believes that children with additional needs deserve appropriate supports to be in place before transitioning to mainstream. This will particularly benefit children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, speech and language disorders and Autism.

Funding must be ring fenced to ensure all Early Intervention Centres have appropriate levels of support in the areas of Speech and Language, Occupational Therapy and Clinical Psychological Services to ensure the scandal of 18-month waiting lists is eliminated.

Other Key Recommendations

- Where co-location is agreed and implemented, IPPN recommends that these pre-schools are governed by the Board of Management and managed on a day-to-day basis by principals subject to issues such as enhanced principal allowances, additional work load and terms and conditions of employment being agreed by all parties.
- Quality is central to any reformed system of Early Years Care and Education. Access without quality can be detrimental to a child's future development. In that regard, IPPN proposes that continued provision of State funding to Early Years Services be contingent on these services achieving agreed standards of quality assurance as verifiable by a dedicated education-focused Early Years inspectorate.
- In that context, IPPN recommends that class leaders are either fully-qualified primary teachers or alternatively, have a Level 8 degree in Early Childhood Education and Practice. Childcare Assistants must have, as a minimum, a Level 6 FETAC qualification in childcare.

- Ireland has some of the highest childcare costs in Europe. The latest figures indicate that a dual-earner family with 2 children will pay one third of its income on childcare costs. Current Irish government investment in Early Years is 0.2% of GDP, considerably less than OECD average of 0.8%. Consequently, IPPN supports direct subsidisation of childcare places as opposed to providing parents with tax relief/ credits for children. This will provide the 'double dividend' of affordable childcare places and also quality support for children's development while simultaneously ensuring a targeted provision.
- All current and future primary school design projects should include provision for Early Years Education as a default design criterion.
- The free ECCE school year has been an unqualified success and represents great value for an outlay of €175 million per year. IPPN applauds the decision to introduce a second free pre-school year announced in Budget 2016.
- IPPN also advocates that the €2 cut to capitation grants for the existing free pre-school year be restored and that the adult-child ratio be restored to pre-austerity levels.
- Early childhood education covers children from birth to 6 years. As a significant percentage of these children attend a primary school before the age of 6, the government must reaffirm a previous commitment to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio in junior classes to 20:1 over the term of the next government.
- Children thrive in the first year of life when close to a parent, with resulting benefits for society. There is considerable merit in introducing paid parental leave for a 6-month period immediately following paid maternity leave at the same rate. This initiative would cost €252 million but would address affordability of childcare issues for families and considerably reduce domestic stress-related problems, while ensuring children have a proper start in life.
- As quality provision should be the primary objective of every pre-school setting, an annual audit of quality must be conducted in every facility. This assessment should review curriculum provision, child development, data gathering procedures and observations of practise.
- Four departments in Government currently have an input into early years resourcing and provision- the Department of Children of Social Protection, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, The Department of Health and the Department of Education and Skills. IPPN believes that funding and resource provision should come under the umbrella of one dedicated Department in Government.
- With the introduction of a second free pre-school year, IPPN considers that it is now timely to re-examine the age at which a child should officially begin mainstream schooling.

5. CONCLUSIONS

All the research shows that investment in Early Years and School-Age Care and Education pays dividends – for the individual, for families and for society in general. Ireland needs to increase its investment in this sector from 0.2% GDP to 0.8% and continue the progress already underway, as well as that outlined in the various government departments’ Action Plans. Transition to primary school is an area that requires more investment and more integration and joined-up thinking. Implementing the above recommendations would go a long way towards ensuring that Irish children will indeed have access to the best education system in the world, a lofty and laudable ambition, and one that is definitely worth striving for.