Support Measures for Learners in Early Childhood and School Education

Definition of the Target Group(s)

The Programme for Government states that “Education is the key to giving every child an equal opportunity in life. No child should be left behind in economic recovery and we should use our strengthening economy to become a leader in the provision of world-class education and skills” (Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 [1]).

A number of key national education and training strategies underpin the work of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). These strategies drive the significant changes that are being planned and implemented across the continuum of education in a “whole-of-system” approach. These include the:

- National Skills Strategy 2025 [2]
- National Strategy on Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020 [3]

The DES works with a number of other departments to advance cross-cutting priority areas, including with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs [5] (DCYA), in order to improve the quality of education provision, to develop the workforce in the Early Years sector, and to improve the school engagement, participation and retention levels of learners from disadvantaged background.

In 1994, a pre-school project, the Early Start Programme [6], was established in 40 primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage, for children who are most at risk of not succeeding in education. The total number of spaces provided by the existing 40 Early Start centres is 1,650. The programme is a one-year intervention scheme to meet the needs of children who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system. The project involves an educational programme to enhance overall development, help prevent school failure and offset the effects of social disadvantage. Parental involvement is one of the core elements of the programme in recognition of the parent/guardian as the prime educator of the child and to encourage the parent/guardian to become involved in his/her child's education.

The Early Start curriculum prioritises the four core areas of language, cognition, social development, and personal development. Teachers are expected to support children’s development in the core
areas through engaging them in structured play activities. Parents’ involvement is one of the core elements of the programme. A **Home School Community Liaison** (HSCL) coordinator works with the Early Start staff to develop a structured plan to support parents, ranging from initial contact with families to the enrolment of new pupils at open days. A programme of structured activities throughout the year is developed. The purpose of the parents’ involvement is to develop the parents as prime educators, providing them with the relevant skills to maximise their child’s participation in the pre-school process and thus laying the foundations for future educational achievement.

The **Rutland Street Project** [7] is a programme in a Dublin inner city community. Although not part of Early Start, it was used to pilot many of the approaches later incorporated in the project.

The Early Years Education Policy Unit in the DES is co-located with the **DCYA** [8] to ensure that policy developments in the early childhood sector are developed within an overall strategic policy framework for children. The DES has a key role in supporting quality within the sector and works closely with the DCYA.

Working with agencies funded by the DCYA, the **National Council for Curriculum and Assessment** [9] (NCCA) produced an **Aistear-in-Action** [10] toolkit which is a resource for use in early years settings showing how the Aistear themes of Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Exploring and Thinking and Communication translate into practice. The Department has also directed the implementation of **Síolta** [11], the National Quality Framework, by working with these agencies. The **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme** [12] was first introduced in January 2010 and is being administered by the DCYA. Under the terms of this initiative, all children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months in September of the relevant year are entitled to a maximum of two free-of-charge pre-school years of appropriate programme-based activities in the year/s prior to starting primary school. While participation is voluntary, there has been a very positive response to the scheme. Approximately 104,441 or 95% of eligible children were enrolled in pre-school services in the 2015/2016 school year.

**Specific Support Measures**

The Social Inclusion Unit in the DES is responsible for developing and promoting a coordinated department response to tackling educational disadvantage from pre-school through to second-level education (3 to 18 years).

The Department provides a number of specific targeted measures for the support of learners who may be disadvantaged due to socio-economic or cultural circumstances. These measures can be grouped under the supports for children and young people from disadvantaged communities and supports for immigrant children for whom English is not their first language. The commitment of the Department to continue to provide support for these groups is reaffirmed in **The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020** [3].

The **Incredible Years** [13] teacher programme is an evidence-based programme for teachers, partnering with parents, which reduces behavioural difficulties and strengthens social and emotional competence in early primary school-age children.

The **Friends Programmes** [14] reduce anxiety and promote coping, resilience and school-connectedness in children and young people from 4-18 years.

The **National Educational Psychological Service** [15] (NEPS) supports the development of the wellbeing and academic, social and emotional competence of all pupils. NEPS psychologists specialise in working with the school community. They work in partnership with teachers, parents and children in
identifying educational needs. They offer a range of services aimed at meeting these needs, for example, supporting individual students (through consultation and assessment), special projects and research.

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the action plan for educational inclusion, focuses on addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education. The DEIS action plan provides for a standardised system for identifying levels of disadvantage and an integrated School Support Programme (SSP). It represents a shift in emphasis away from individual initiatives that address a particular aspect of the problem towards a multi-faceted and more integrated approach.

The key principle of early intervention underpins both the early childhood education measure and many of the literacy and numeracy measures being adopted under the new action plan. The plan also places a renewed emphasis on the involvement of parents and families in children's education in schools. Central to the success of the action plan is an increased emphasis on planning at school and school cluster level, target-setting and measurement of progress and outcomes to ensure that the increased investment is matched by an improvement in educational outcomes for the children and young people concerned. The following supports are provided under DEIS:

- Reduced class sizes in junior and senior classes in primary schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage;

- Administrative principals;

- DEIS grants;

- Access to literacy/numeracy support such as Reading Recovery, Maths Recovery, First Steps, Ready Steady Go, Demonstration Library Projects;

- School books grant scheme;

- School meals programme;


- School planning, target-setting;

- School Completion Programme (SCP);

- Home School Community Liaison (HSCL);

- Continuous Professional Development.
Ongoing evaluation of DEIS is provided for by the Education Research Centre (ERC). The latest report describes the results of testing in reading and mathematics among 17,000 second, third, fifth and sixth class pupils in 118 urban DEIS schools in 2016. Data on these pupils’ attitudes to school and school work are also described. The findings indicate that achievement in reading and mathematics has continued to improve in DEIS schools, and this has been accompanied by increased positivity among pupils towards school and education.

The ERC has completed earlier achievement testing reports, one each on the rural and urban dimension of DEIS. These reports, together with two Inspectorate Reports on Planning in DEIS Primary and Post-Primary Schools in January 2012 are available. All of these evaluations demonstrated positive outcomes for both schools and children participating in the DEIS programme.

Other children who are considered to be disadvantaged attend community pre-schools or crèches. The Community Child Care Subvention (CCS) programme provides support funding to community child care services to enable them to charge reduced child care fees to disadvantaged and low-income parents.

Diversity and Equality Guidelines were launched in December 2006 by the then Office of the Minister for Children to support childcare practitioners, early childhood teachers, managers and policy makers in their exploration, understanding and development of diversity and equality practice. These guidelines were implemented through a funding initiative which supported pre-school services to undertake accredited equality and diversity training, thereby supporting the enrolment, retention and integration of children from minority groups in mainstream settings.

Two key areas of recent policy development support inclusion and diversity. New Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools were published in September 2013. These procedures were developed following consultation with the relevant education partners and have resulted from the implementation of the Action Plan on Bullying that was published in January 2013. These procedures provide a bullying policy template and practical guidance and tips so that schools are clear on what they have to do to prevent and tackle school-based bullying behaviour amongst its pupils, and in dealing with any negative impact of bullying behaviour that occurs elsewhere. Schools are required to develop and adopt an anti-bullying policy which complies with the requirements of these procedures no later than the end of the current school term. In developing its anti-bullying policy, the Board of Management of each school must consult with parents, students, and all school staff, and aim to create a positive school culture and climate that is inclusive and welcoming of difference.

The Children First Act, 2015 provides for a number of key child protection measures and procedures that are relevant to schools in keeping children safe and producing and updating Child Safeguarding Statement. Boards of Management have a key responsibility to ensure that this is achieved. The child protection procedures require all schools to undertake an annual review of compliance and to confirm to its parent association that this is done. The Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017, published on 2 October 2017, became operational on 11 December 2017.

The recent Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill 2014 and legislative proposals have been given governmental approval to improve the schools’ admissions processes and to ensure that the way schools decide on applications is structured, fair and transparent, and that every child is treated fairly.

The profile of the Irish population has changed dramatically in recent years. Parental demand has increased for various types of schools, alternative patronage models, plurality and diversity. The
recommended steps to ensure that the education system at primary level could provide a sufficiently diverse number and range of primary schools to cater for children of all religions and none. New multi-denominational schools have been established under the Patronage Divestment process over that period.

The profile of the Irish population has changed significantly over the past fifteen years. Given the diversity of early years’ provision in Ireland, it is difficult to obtain accurate figures for migrants who are in actual formal services at this level. However, it has been estimated that approximately 10% of children availing of pre-school services are migrants. Over 10% of the Irish student population now speak a home language that is neither Irish nor English (June 2016 - Council of Europe Workshop, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin). Some schools have up to 50% of the student population speaking at least one language other than English or Irish at home. Schools and teachers are encouraged to look at how multilingualism in their schools can become an asset, and how a whole school approach to supporting it can be developed. English as an additional language (EAL) supports for teachers are available from the NCCA. A task-based approach to teaching and learning is promoted. English Language Proficiency Benchmarks specify what pupils should be able to do in English. A breadth of resources, test-materials and guidance is available from the NCCA.

In cooperation with the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe (of which Ireland is a member), the European Centre for Modern Languages functions as a catalyst for reform in the teaching and learning of languages. Work is underway in the DES to improve the teaching and learning of languages in Irish schools. This includes the recent development of a new integrated primary languages curriculum which is currently being introduced to all Irish primary schools. This is accompanied by new teaching and learning resources, as well as high quality continuing professional development for teachers.

The Special Education Section in the DES is responsible for the development of policy for children with special educational needs, and the development of comprehensive, efficient and effective services for these children. The section maintains close links with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), the remit of which includes direct delivery of services that will facilitate access to education for children with disabilities. Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) employed by the NCSE, are based throughout the country to co-ordinate services at local level. While the NCSE has a research and advisory role, the Department continues to have responsibility for policy.

In March 2017, other support services transferred from the DES to the NCSE. These services joined with the services already being provided by SENOs and administrative staff to form a new NCSE Support Service for schools and pupils in March 2017. These include the:

- **Special Education Support Service** (SESS);
- **National Behaviour Support Service** (NBSS);
- **Visiting Teacher Service for Children who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and Children who are Blind/Visually Impaired** (VTHVI).

This new service aims to develop schools’ capacity to include pupils with special educational needs and to promote a continuum of educational provision which is inclusive and responsive.

The SESS coordinates, develops and delivers a range of professional development initiatives and
support structures for school personnel working with pupils with special educational needs in mainstream primary, special schools and special classes.

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