

Barriers to education facing vulnerable groups

June 2018

Introduction

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills on topic of the barriers to education facing vulnerable groups. Specifically, our comments will relate to the barriers children and young people from vulnerable backgrounds face encounter when accessing education. Barnardos works with over 14,000 children, young people and their families each year. We know the transformative affect education can have on a child's life; but too often we see the impact a child's family circumstances (such as parents' financial status, where they live or having an unstable home life) can have on their education. Ultimately such circumstances can dramatically alter a child's chance in later life.

The cost of education

A child's right to primary education is enshrined in the Irish Constitution; yet, the substantial financial cost of sending a child to primary school means access to education is not free and anything but equal.¹ Every year for more than a decade parents have been telling Barnardos- through our School Costs Survey- that their children's back to school costs places a significant financial burden upon them. Inevitably it is families with the lowest incomes who are disproportionately affected by school costs putting children who are already disadvantaged at even greater risk of failing to fulfil their potential. For families with the low incomes paying for their child's education often results in cutting back on essentials like food or heat.² Many parents are forced into debt in order to give their child equal access to what should be a freely available, human right and is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.³ This is grossly unfair and something as a nation we should be ashamed of. All

¹ Bunreacht na hEireann, *Article 42.4*

² Barnardos, (2017) *School Costs Survey 2017*. Dublin: Barnardos

³ United Nations, (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Geneva: United Nations.

children deserve a level playing field from which to progress into adulthood with the same opportunities as their peers, regardless of their parent's ability to pay.

Barnardos' vision is a genuinely free school system that all children can benefit from to reach their potential. We have calculated the cost of funding those items essential for sending a child to school in Ireland today (school books, classroom resources, voluntary contribution, the School Transport Scheme fee and increasing capitation to schools) and found a relatively modest investment could guarantee free education for all children. The impact of an inclusive, supportive education system reaches far beyond school grades. Barnardos' believes the bulk of current costs paid by parents should be removed and instead the Department of Education should fully fund schools to ensure essentials such as school books, classroom resources and basic essentials for running a school are provided. Our analysis, first published in 2015 and updated at the end of 2017, used data from Department of Education, findings from our School Costs Survey and estimated population projection.⁴ We calculate it would cost just an extra €103 million annually to deliver free primary education and an extra €126 million in secondary education (see Appendix 1 for full breakdown of costs). An additional €103 million in primary education equates to around €185 per pupil per year. To put this into context, the Department of Education's overall budget exceeds €10bn annually.

Exclusion from school

One specific barrier facing children and young people from vulnerable backgrounds is exclusion from school by means of a reduction in their school hours. In our experience, the practice of reduced timetables is very varied across the country. Some principals and teachers opt to impose a reduced timetable as a response to a child's challenging behaviour when there is a lack of available learning supports for the student, while others use it as a disciplinary method. The practice appears largely unregulated; worryingly there are no guidelines around its usage. There is no requirement for schools to report on the practice and Department inspectors don't collect widespread data on it. This means the real scale of the use of reduced timetables is unknown.

We know teachers are juggling high number of pupils with differing needs and ability. However, Barnardos is worryingly working with children as young as five who have been placed on reduced timetables (see Appendix 2). Limiting a child's time in school

⁴ Barnardos (2015) *Free Education for All School Children*. Dublin: Barnardos

is an extremely serious step as it undermines their right to education. We are concerned about the prolonged use of school exclusion tactics and the lack of clarity about whose responsibility it is to seek a resolution for the child. The impact of exclusion on a child can be profound; feelings of confusion, blame and isolation are common. And while parental consent is required for a child to be placed on a limited timetable, many parents, particularly those who have a background of educational disadvantage, may not realise the impact missing school will have on the educational attainment of their child. Children need support and encouragement to stay engaged in education, not greater social exclusion and isolation.

In our view, reduced timetables should only be used as a measure of last resort once all other avenues to address the issue have been explored and only if a reintegration strategy to restore the child to normal hours is in place. We are, however, aware of the challenges schools face in trying to access these avenues of support through National Educational Psychology Service, the National Behaviour Support Service or the Home School Community Liaison Programme. The exclusion of a child from class through using reduced timetables is described by Tusla's 'Developing the Statement of Strategy for School Attendance: Guidelines for Schools' as akin to a suspension.⁵ These guidelines are a welcome first step towards greater inclusivity in schools. They recognise the complexity of factors involved and emphasise the need for schools to examine their own values, practices, organisation structures and culture; to identify ways they can better promote a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all students. However they give little guidance on the use of reduced timetables.

A child's challenging behaviour in school is a clear indication something is amiss. A combination of school-based supports and home-based supports is the most appropriate response to the needs of a child who cannot manage a classroom setting without assistance. Schools have a responsibility to create a positive learning environment which recognises students' individual needs in advance, preventing the reliance on such drastic measures as reduced timetables. School based supports could include creating classroom environments which contribute to positive behaviour, increased training, resources and programmes to foster children's social and emotional development within the curriculum and improved techniques to manage challenging behaviour. Creating this environment would be a win-win situation; resulting in happier

⁵ Tusla. (2016) *Developing the Statement of Strategy for School Attendance: Guidelines*

and more engaged students and some schools spending less time and resources managing poor engagement and behaviour with an iron fist.

Family Support services should be made available to families where children are presenting challenging behaviour in school. 'Family Support' is a wide range of services to children and families which evaluate what a child and family's needs are and carefully tailor a personal package of services to respond to those needs. These supports may include but are not limited to parenting programmes, therapeutic supports and practical advice and help. Providing Family Support services to children would help identify and rectify issues at home which may be affecting a child's school life. This would better support the child and achieve much more than simply reducing their attendance at school.

Teen parents

Being a young person who is pregnant or is a parent means facing barriers to continue in education; however young parent from vulnerable backgrounds are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to accessing and continuing in education. Teen pregnancy is closely associated with early school leaving. Maternal education is proven to be one of the largest predictors of infant health.⁶ Barnardos' Teen Parent Programme provides supports to teenage parents and their children, helping to promote and nurture their educational, emotional and social well-being. As part of the supports provided to parents we identify pathways to returning to education and training. For many young families dependent on a low income from social welfare, trying to navigate a complex system of supports for training and education opportunities can be daunting.

Parents express a desire to pursue further opportunities but are cautious about the impact this will have on their weekly income. This is further compounded by the costs of returning to training and education such as transport, books and out of pocket expenses. Despite policy changes in recent years access to quality, affordable childcare remains a significant barrier for many parents. For young families in rural areas the issue of transport is particularly critical. Intrinsically linked to this is the impact of the housing crisis. The dearth of supply of accommodation in urban centres can force young families to move to more isolated rural areas where they are reliant on

⁶ Williams J. et al. (2009) *Growing up in Ireland: The lives of 9 year olds*. Dublin: Department of Health and Children

rural transport links. In general lack of affordable and social housing options remains one of the biggest barriers to young parents remaining in education.

Schools, colleges and training centres should have a policy in place for pregnant and parent students. Guidance from the Department of Education and Skills to ensure schools put a policy in place and give some level of consistency is required. Currently there is no consistent approach to supporting teen parents and prevailing negative attitudes to teen pregnancy and parenthood often remain entrenched. The pressures of studying and exam time are magnified for young parents who often struggle to balance parenting with their education. One example from our Teen Parent Programme is the speed schools make and progress home school tuition applications for students on maternity leave. While it seems the Department of Education and Skills process these applications efficiently and promptly, schools can delay signing off paperwork causing unnecessary stress on the student and reducing their access to this important support.

Education is a crucial in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Barnardos provides intensive support to teen parents for a specific period of time in their child's early years; however many parents chose to return to education some time later. In our experience, teen parents who receive good supports initially (from Barnardos or other organisations) enabling them to thrive as parents, may decide to pause their education to care for their children. When returning to education after a gap of several years these young parents find there are little supports available to them as they have aged out of teen parent programmes. Barnardos offers as much sign posting and advice as possible; however we believe there should be additional services available for these parents to support their return to education.

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Appendix 1: The Cost of Free Education

	Free School Books	Removing Voluntary Contribution	Free Classroom Resources	Free School Transport	Restoring Capital Grant Level	Total
2014/2015 Current Exchequer Funding	€20m	€0	€0	€163.5m	€287m	€470.5m
Additional cost to make Primary Education free	€20m	€42m	€19.5m	€5m	€16.7m	€103.2m
Additional cost to make Secondary Education free	€20m	€47m	€19m	€22.4m	€18.5	€126.9m
Additional cost to make education free for all children	€40m	€89m	€38.5m	€27.4m	€35.2m	€230.1m

Appendix 2: Exclusion from education case studies

Case study: Jamie

Jamie is 16 years old and was placed on a reduced timetable since September 2015. As a result has not attended school. His parents are not in a position to be strong advocates for him and feel he is not wanted in the school. Barnardos was working with Jamie and his family. Throughout the school year, his Barnardos worker met with the school principal, and learnt that no regular reviews had been conducted or were planned. There was no plan to return Jamie to normal school hours.

Barnardos engaged with Educational Welfare Officers, National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) and home tuition services on Jamie's behalf. Unfortunately, as he was 16 Jamie was not a priority for Tusla's Educational Welfare Services, which already have heavy caseloads. Jamie is too young for Youthreach, so the priority was to secure a school placement for him. While Jamie wanted to return to school, his school's preference was for home tuition to be given and an assessment by NEPS indicated that Jamie should be medically exempt from attending mainstream school. However the application process for home tuition is complex and Jamie's parents needed to be supported to complete it.

Ultimately, Jamie never returned to school and missed out on the whole academic year with the result he is falling behind his peers educationally and socially. Jamie has now become socially withdrawn and disengaged from the education system.

Case study: Caoimhe

Caoimhe was just five years old. She was placed on a reduced timetable, finishing school at 11am each day. With Barnardos' encouragement and support, her parent's spoke with the school to seek a restoration of their child's school hours. This has resulted in the allocation of additional resource hours to facilitate Caoimhe's full participation in school. While her hours have now been fully restored, Caoimhe will have to repeat Junior Infants as she has missed too much time to progress with her class. The repercussions of this experience can be multiple and profound. Not only will Caoimhe have to face the stigma of being in the year below her peers, she will likely have lost her trust in the school environment and it could also affect her friendships and attachments as she has to start again with a new class.