

## Submission to Department of Education and Skills on Guidelines for the use of reduced timetables

October 2019

### 1. Introduction

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft guidelines developed by the Department of Education and Skills, Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla Educational Welfare Service in relation to the use of reduced timetable/reduced day in schools.

Barnardos mission is to help transform children's lives through our services; support parents; and challenge society where it fails our children. In 2018, we worked with nearly 18,000 children, young people and their families. Barnardos provides practical and emotional supports to children and parents in its 41 centres, in families' own homes, through the school environment, and within their communities.

### 2. Context

Barnardos provides services before, during, and after school to support children in their social and emotional development, which ultimately supports their education. We provide two evidence-based programmes in schools. A reading programme, called *Wizards of Words*, that targets literacy development and a classroom-based programme called *Roots of Empathy*, which has shown significant effect in reducing levels of aggression among school children by raising social-emotional competence and increasing empathy<sup>1</sup>. We know the transformative affect education can have on a child's life, however for some children this potential is restricted due to the use of reduced timetables.

In our work with children we recognise that reduced timetables can sometimes be used as a tool to support a child or young person manage their educational attendance. For example, in instances of teenage pregnancy, Barnardos has previously worked collaboratively with schools to negotiate a reduced school day in order to support the holistic needs of the young person. In other instances, a closely managed process of re-integrating within the school as part of the use of a reduced timetable has proved successful.

However, the use of a reduced timetable is often in response to a lack of adequate supports and interventions being available outside of the school environment. A lack of available supports from professional services such as CAMHS and disability services can lead to an

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<sup>1</sup> Roots of Empathy (2019) *Research Summary*, available: [https://www.rootsofempathy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ROE-Research-Summary\\_July2019-1.pdf](https://www.rootsofempathy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ROE-Research-Summary_July2019-1.pdf)

exacerbation of issues. Schools often take a behaviour management approach rather than promoting positive behaviour. A child's challenging behaviour in school is a clear indication something is amiss, therefore a combination of school-based supports and home-based supports would be the most appropriate response to the needs of a child who cannot manage a classroom setting without assistance. A response, of excluding a child or young person from the school day, therefore fails to truly address the root cause of the problem and can lead to children feeling that they are perceived negatively by their peers. The focus on the continued disruptive behaviour of the child or young person needs to instead shift to one of early intervention with professionals asking – what has happened? What do we need to do to help this child or young person participate and be included in the school day?

We have also observed a variance in practice, stemming perhaps from a lack of coherent guidelines, meaning that the practice of using a reduced timetable can have a negative impact on children and their educational attainment. Our view is that reduced timetables should only be used as a measure of last resort once all other avenues to address an issue have been explored and then only if a reintegration strategy to restore the child to normal hours is in place.

### **3. What should be included in the guidelines?**

Under Article 28 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) children have the right to education. Barnardos believes limiting a child's time in school is an extremely serious step as it undermines their right to education and therefore this practice should be minimised where possible. We welcome the drafting of a set of guidelines for schools, by Tusla and the departments of Education and Skills and Children and Youth Affairs. Barnardos has called for the development of such guidelines for some time and the drafting of a document in this vein is a positive step.

#### **Exceptional Occurrence**

At the outset the guidelines should clearly state that the placement of a child or young person on a reduced timetable is an exceptional occurrence and should only occur after other areas of support are exhausted. The guidelines need to provide adequate guidance for schools on the issues that arise prior to, during and after the use of a reduced timetable / reduced day. The guidelines, therefore, should take a chronological approach providing information about what needs to happen at each stage. A number of cross-cutting themes should be addressed.

#### **The voice of the child**

It is critical that the voice and experience of the child or young person is heard throughout the process. The guidelines should make explicit reference to the need to explain why and for how long the reduced timetable will be applied, engaging with the child or young person throughout the process. The guidelines should make reference to documents published by

both the Department of Children and Youth Affairs<sup>2</sup> and Tusla<sup>3</sup> on children and young people's participation as a means of offering further information and support to schools. Guidance in relation to such participation should be cognisant of engaging with 'seldom heard voices'. This terminology refers to children and young people who have less opportunity to participate or have their voice heard, due to greater obstacles to participation that do not exist in other cohorts of the population (examples include children with health issues or those from minority groups). Supporting and involving children and young people from these cohorts can be more challenging and they may require greater support. The guidelines should refer to toolkits that provide best practice on engaging this cohort<sup>4</sup>.

### **Parental Consent**

Along with emphasising the voice of the child, the guidelines must clearly state the need for parental consent with regard to placing a child or young person on a reduced timetable and any subsequent reduction in the time spent at school going forward. Positively engaging parents from the outset has the potential to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes such as a successful re-integration into a full school day. Parents should be included and consulted throughout the process and guidance on the withdrawal of parental consent, and consequences of same, should also be provided. The guidelines should also include details of the development of a localised complaints and appeals procedure, in plain, simple and accessible language. Support should also be provided where parents have literacy issues, and availability of such supports should be promoted. At present parents can appeal the use of a reduced time table under Section 29 of the Education Act. However, a clear local complaints procedure should mitigate against the need to resort to this. Reference should be made to Tusla's guidance on parental participation to offer further insight and advice<sup>5</sup>.

### **Re-integration Plan**

The guidelines must provide clear direction on the need for each student placed on a reduced timetable to have a mandatory re-integration plan. Information should be provided about what this re-integration plan should include. For example, there should be a clear timeframe for the extent of the reduced timetable, frequency of review meetings, how progress will be monitored and recorded.

### **Record keeping**

#### *Individual cases*

In order to provide an evidence-based rationale for placing a student on a reduced timetable, the guidelines should emphasise the importance of keeping a record of the events leading up to the use of a reduced timetable. This could include recording the availability of other supports for the child or young person, attempts to avail of same, and recording any

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<sup>2</sup> National Strategy on Children and Young Peoples Participation in Decision Making 2015-2020 published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs - <https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/playandrec/20150617NatStratonChildrenandYoungPeoplesParticipationinDecisionMaking2015-2020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Tusla's Child and Youth Participation Strategy (2019 -2023) [https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/tusla\\_child\\_and\\_youth\\_participation\\_strategy-2019-2023.pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/tusla_child_and_youth_participation_strategy-2019-2023.pdf) and the Toolkit - [https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tusla\\_-\\_Toolkit\\_\(web\\_version\).pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tusla_-_Toolkit_(web_version).pdf)

<sup>4</sup> A Practical guide to Including Seldom-heard Children and Young People in Decision-making - <https://www.comhairlenanog.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Seldom-Heard-toolkit.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Parental\\_Participation\\_Toolkit\\_Dec\\_2015.pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Parental_Participation_Toolkit_Dec_2015.pdf)

interventions that have taken place and the results of these. Where no alternatives exist, this data will serve as an evidence base to advocate for further resources to provide appropriate interventions, in order to avoid placing a child on a reduced timetable.

The guidelines should include the need to record the length of time the child/young person is in school each day when placed on a reduced timetable / reduced day and any work assigned to be completed at home. Guidance should be provided on who needs to be notified (e.g. SENO, EWO) when a child/young person is on a reduced timetable. Progress against the re-integration plan should be monitored and recorded. Any ongoing monitoring requirements once re-integration into the school day occurs, should also be outlined. Records should be available for review, for parents and children and in the context of school inspections and whole school evaluations.

#### *Reporting and monitoring of school level data*

The guidelines should identify the disaggregated data required to facilitate reports to the Department of Education on the use of reduced timetables at the school level.

A template should be provided in the guidelines for return to the department at the end of each school year.

#### **Inter-agency approaches**

The guidelines should provide guidance to schools around encouraging the family to link in with key services operational in the school system such as Education Welfare Officer, NEPS, National Behavioural Support Service (only available in secondary schools), Home School Liaison Officer (only available in DEIS schools) and / or School Completion Programme (currently 180 projects running offering different supports). These professionals have a mandate to support vulnerable pupils and the guidelines should direct schools in informing parents about how they can be of further assistance.

We work with many schools collaboratively with the Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs), and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to ensure the child remains in the school or is phased back in very quickly. Inter-agency working can deliver positive results particularly when coupled with a plan of re-integration to a full school day. We are, however, aware of the challenges schools face in trying to access these avenues of support.

## **4. Concluding Comments**

Schools have a responsibility to create a positive learning environment that recognises students' individual needs, preventing the reliance on such drastic measures such as shortened school days. School based supports could include creating classroom environments that contribute to positive behaviour, increased training, resources and programmes for teachers 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; with the potential for happier and more engaged students and some schools spending less time and resources managing poor engagement and behaviour with such a hard line approach.

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 that assesses and determines the presenting needs of a child and their family and tailors a personal package of services to respond to those needs. These supports may include but are not limited to working with the child, 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. Evidence from Barnardos parenting programme (Partnership with Parents), has been shown to have a direct impact on school attendance, by improving family routines and offering stability to the family home and relationships.<sup>6</sup> Such family support services would better serve the child and achieve much more than simply reducing their attendance at school.

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<sup>6</sup> Connolly, N., Adams, K., & Fleming, P. (forthcoming). *Evaluation of the Partnership with Parents™ Programme*. Dublin: Barnardos.