

Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills on the current use of reduced timetables

May 2019

Introduction

- 1.1. Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills on the matter of the current use of reduced timetables.
- 1.2. 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.
- 1.3. Barnardos provides services before, during, and after school to support children in their social and emotional development which supports their education. We also provide an evidence-based reading programme in schools which targets literacy development and an evidence-based programme delivered in primary school classrooms which has shown significant effect in reducing levels of aggression among school children by raising social-emotional competence and increasing empathy. We know the transformative affect education can have on a child's life, however for some children this potential is restricted due to them being placed on reduced timetables.
- 1.4. We welcome the Minister for Education's assertion¹ that reduced timetables should not be used as a 'behavioural management technique'. In our work with children we

¹ Minister for Education, Joe McHugh, Written Answers, Education Welfare Services, 22 January 2019, [52602/18].

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.

- 1.5. However, despite this, a variance in practice, stemming perhaps from a lack of coherent guidelines, means that the practice of using reduced timetables can have a negative impact on children and their educational attainment. In our view, reduced timetables should only be used as a measure of last resort once all other avenues to address an issue have been explored and only if a reintegration strategy to restore the child to normal hours is in place.
- 1.6. At present there is a dearth of information collected by the Department of Education and Tusla about the extent of the use of reduced timetabling. In an attempt to build a picture of the scale of this practice across schools we are aware that the Department has begun to include questions about the number of students on reduced timetables in their inspection models, especially the Special Needs Inspection model². In a recent online survey³ conducted by the autism charity As I Am, 17 per cent of respondents stated that their child was on a reduced timetable.
- 1.7. Our comments contained in this submission are set out under the following headings:
 - Insights from Barnardos work with children and families
 - Need for a combined approach of school- and home-based supports
 - Conclusion and Recommendations
 - Case Study

² Minister for Education, Joe McHugh, Written Answers, Education Welfare Services, 7 March 2019, [11417/18 & 11417/19]. Available: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2019-03-07a.264&s=reduced+timetables#g265.g>

³ <https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Invisible-Children-Survey-on-School-Absence-Withdrawl-in-Irelands-Autism-Community-April-2019.pdf>

Insights from Barnardos work with children and families

- 1.8. Under Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) children have the right to education. The use of reduced timetabling impinges on the realisation of this right.
- 1.9. Across our services, project leaders and workers report the use of reduced timetabling as a means of managing challenging behaviour when there is a lack of available supports for the student. In some instances it is used as a disciplinary method as schools appear unequipped to deal with the negative behaviour being exhibited.
- 1.10. In 2016 Tusla published a guidelines for schools on developing a statement of strategy for school attendance⁴. In this document, the exclusion of a child from class through using reduced timetables is described as akin to a suspension. The publication these guidelines is a welcome first step. These guidelines recognise the complexity of factors involved and emphasise the need for schools to examine their own values, practices, organisation structures and culture; and identify ways they can better promote a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all students. However, there is little guidance in the document on the use of reduced timetables and this needs to be addressed.
- 1.11. In our experience, the practice of reduced timetables is varied across the country. Project Leaders report that this practice is still being used by schools with a detrimental impact on families and children. Other projects report a reduced reliance on this approach in the last year compared with previous years. Nonetheless, we observe that this practice is still being used with children with whom we work across Ireland.
- 1.12. The practice of using reduced timetables appears largely unregulated. There is no requirement for schools to report on the practice and Department inspectors are only now beginning to collect data on it⁵. This means the real scale of the use of reduced timetables still remains unknown.

⁴ Tusla (2016) *Developing the Statement of Strategy for School Attendance: Guidelines for Schools* – available: https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/FINAL_SAS_strategy_eng_2jun.pdf

⁵ Minister for Education, Joe McHugh, Written Answers, Education Welfare Services, 7 March 2019, [11417/18 & 11417/19] – available: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2019-03-07a.264&s=reduced+timetables#g265.q>

- 1.13. 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. A lack of available supports from professional services such as CAMHS and disability services can mean behavioural issues can be exacerbated. Schools often take a behaviour management approach rather than promoting positive behaviour. The response, to exclude the 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 perceived negatively with 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?
- 1.14. 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 and social and emotional development of their child. Children need support and encouragement to stay engaged in education, not greater social exclusion and isolation.

Need for a combined approach of school- and home-based supports

- 1.15. 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 most appropriate response to the needs of a child who cannot manage a classroom setting without assistance.
- 1.16. Schools have a responsibility to create a positive learning environment which recognises students' individual needs, preventing the reliance on such drastic measures such as shortened school days. School based supports could include creating classroom environments which 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.

- 1.17. Creating this environment would be a win-win situation; resulting in happier and more engaged students and some schools spending less time and resources managing poor engagement and behaviour with such a hard line approach. 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.
- 1.18. 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. They also include individual and group work with children. 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.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- 1.19. 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 where a reintegration strategy to restore the child to normal hours is in place.

Recommendations

1. The Department of Education should develop and disseminate guidelines for schools on the use of reduced timetables. Guidelines could also include – approaches to supporting the child and family, promoting positive behaviour as a school culture; providing information about the availability of family support services and guidance on developing individualised plans which focus on removing the blocks which are preventing the child's proactive engagement in education.
2. The Department of Education should develop a comprehensive approach to gathering data on this practice through the schools inspection process. This data

should be analysed and published on the Department of Education's website and the broader government data portal – www.data.gov.ie.

3. The Government should provide additional family based supports, such as those provided by Barnardos and other organisations, which complement school based interventions.
4. Tusla should develop more detailed guidance around the use of reduced timetables within the context of its guidelines for schools in developing a strategy for School Attendance.

Case Study

Case Study 1: Adam

We are currently working with a little boy and his mother. Adam is 6 years old and has a diagnosis of Autism and ADHD. When Adam was in Junior Infants his school placed him on a reduced time table. While Barnardos does not offer a specialised service for children with autism we frequently work with children and families with such a diagnosis

Due to his diagnosis Adam was given a place in the Autism Unit in his school with a high level of support. However, despite this his teacher struggled from day one and put pressure on his parents for a new assessment querying ADHD. As his parents were concerned about his school placement, they paid for this assessment privately despite this being beyond their means.

Adam was prescribed medication as part of an ADHD diagnosis. This has had a negative impact on him at home such as difficulty sleeping at night. But his teacher/school continued to describe his behaviour as too difficult to manage during the school day. As a result Adam was placed on a reduced timetable. This was introduced to the parents as the only option for their child despite no clear evidence that any other plans had been tried or implemented. Adam's parents agreed in order to keep their son in school as they felt that he is academically bright and should do well in school with the right supports.

In order for Adam to reach his full potential in school, he needs support from professional services. But he is not getting the supports needed from the designated ASD service in his area.

Due to this child's reduced timetable his mother has been forced to take time out of work. Each day Adam's Mam drops him to school and collects him two hours later. Adam is also no longer allowed to travel on the school bus. There appears to be no plan to reinstate his

hours or come up with a concrete plan to allow Adam access the full school curriculum. Before starting primary school Adam attended pre-school for a full day. He did really well in this placement with less supports than the school's Autism Unit has available.

The introduction of the reduced timetable has put extraordinary pressure financially and emotionally on Adam's family. A reduced school time table has had no benefit for Adam and has meant reduced access, to developing peer relationships, no extra supports such as Speech and Language or Occupational Therapy. There appears to be no solid reason for the reduced timetable other than to alleviate the perceived pressures on the staff in the unit.

While Barnardos does not offer a specialised service for children with autism we frequently work with children with such a diagnosis. In such instances we work with parents to support them manage their child's diagnosis, introduce new parenting strategies and work the individual child around managing their behaviour. Often times we find that the lack of support from professional disability services can have a spill over effect on the child's participation in school which can lead to placement on a reduced timetable.