

 Office for Social Inclusion An Oifig um Chuimsiú Sóisialta	
	Social Inclusion Forum Workshop
	Children and Young People Educational Disadvantage

National Action Plan Against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-2005 Relevant extracts from Office for Social Inclusion First Annual Report

Ireland's second National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAP/Inclusion) covering the period 2003-2005 was submitted to the European Commission on 31 July 2003. The Office for Social Inclusion (OSI) is the Government Office with overall responsibility for developing, co-ordinating and driving the NAP/Inclusion process.

OSI's first Annual Report on the implementation of the Plan was launched on 17th December 2004 by the Minister for Social and Family Affairs. This report was produced by the OSI in consultation with relevant Government Departments who have policy responsibility for the social inclusion targets and commitments contained in the Plan, and with representatives of the Social Partners through the Social Inclusion Consultative Group.

The following extracts from the Annual Report relate to actions on the targets relevant to this workshop.

Copies of the report, in both Irish and English are available on line through the OSI website – www.socialinclusion.ie – or by contacting the office at 01 704 3851.

Tackling Educational Disadvantage

Education plays a fundamental role in providing full access to life chances and in avoiding and breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Policy objectives should aim to ensure that all young people leave the education system with a high quality education and related qualifications to support their full participation in society and in the economy.

NAP/Inclusion Targets

Tackling educational disadvantage is a special initiative under *Sustaining Progress* and the key NAP/Inclusion targets, which are relevant to this workshop, are as follows:

- To halve the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties by 2006; and
- To reduce the number of young people who leave the school system early so that the percentage of those who complete upper second level or equivalent will reach 85 per cent by 2003 and 90 per cent by 2006.

Baseline data and outcome measures have been lacking but several actions have been initiated to strengthen reporting in the area of literacy. These involve the establishment of a number of systems for monitoring literacy and numeracy levels among children and adults, particularly

those disadvantaged, with the aim of having these systems in place by 2006. The Educational Research Centre (ERC) carried out a survey in 2003 to establish baseline literacy data for 1st, 3rd and 6th classes in disadvantaged primary schools. The survey was based on a fully representative sample of disadvantaged primary schools in Ireland. The report of the survey was published in October 2004. Specific details include:

- It is intended to make the standardised testing of all pupils a requirement at three points during their years of compulsory education, with effect from the 2006-7 academic year. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) have been requested to advise on the key issues relating to implementing this requirement;
- A comprehensive Primary Pupil database is being developed and will begin to be implemented in the 2004-2005 school year;
- National assessments of literacy and numeracy in primary schools (reading in 1st and 5th classes and maths in 4th class) was to be completed in 2004 and the reports of the findings will be available in 2005;
- The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) carried out a survey of proficiency of 15 year-olds in mathematics, literacy and science in 2003. The national and international reports of the survey was released in December 2004; and
- An International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which included Ireland, was carried out in 1995. It is intended, resources permitting, to assess literacy attainment among the adult population in the course of 2005.

The target of halving the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties by 2006 is being met by a strategy of implementing targeted initiatives in disadvantaged primary schools aimed at ensuring that pupils with serious literacy difficulties are supported in improving their attainment levels. Initiatives in this area include giving assistance to disadvantaged primary schools in implementing the Department of Education and Science's *Learning Support Guidelines*, the expansion of the Reading Recovery Programme in disadvantaged primary schools and ongoing training for teachers through the First Steps programmes in selected disadvantaged schools.

The target of reducing the number of young people who leave the school system early is being addressed through a review of educational disadvantage programmes, which is being finalised by the Department of Education and Science. The aim of this review is to ensure that a focussed and integrated approach is taken to address this problem and to that end the review is dealing with how out of school initiatives, such as Youthreach, can be integrated into the strategy dealing with early school leaving. Furthermore the expansion of the School Completion Programme is being considered in the context of the review of disadvantage programmes. In 2003 more than 15,000 pupils were targeted under the programme.

National Educational Welfare Board

The National Educational Welfare Board is the national agency with responsibility for encouraging and supporting regular school attendance. The primary function of the Board is to ensure that each child in the State attends a recognised school or otherwise receives an appropriate education.

Rollout of services by the National Educational Welfare Board is continuing with priority being accorded to disadvantaged communities. Five regional teams have now been established with bases in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford and staff have been

deployed in areas of greatest disadvantage and in areas designated under the Government's RAPID programme. Thirteen towns with significant school going populations also now have an Educational Welfare Officer allocated to them. The Department of Education and Science is working with the Board to ensure that any opportunities for integrated working between Educational Welfare Officers and staff on other educational disadvantage programmes, whose work involves a school attendance element, are exploited to the full.

During summer 2004, the Board received the first comprehensive attendance data returns from schools, which will assist it in keeping the level of need for the new service in particular areas under review. This is the first time that such data has been collected. A report on an analysis of the returns by the Educational Research Centre has been posted on the Board's web site www.newb.ie. Preparatory work is also continuing in relation to the establishment of a register for 16 and 17 year olds who leave school to enter employment.

Alleviating educational disadvantage

The overarching aim is to improve access, transfer and progression for learners with limited access to awards.

In October 2003, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland launched a new national framework of qualifications, spanning from basic education/literacy to doctorate level. The framework will provide for progression pathways to higher levels of education and training for award holders. The placement in the framework of qualifications of existing and previously-made awards is underway. In mid-2004, the framework had reached a stage where the major awards for each level and how these will operate and function in relation to each other in the medium term have been set out. Arrangements have been finalised for the implementation of the framework within higher education in 2004/5 and planning is underway for implementation in further education and training.

Access to third level education

The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, established within the Higher Education Authority, has been fully operational since February 2004 and has taken over the administration of a number of access measures from the Department of Education and Science. These include the Student Assistance Fund, the Fund for Students with Disabilities and the Millennium Partnership Fund for Disadvantage as well as the access element of the Higher Education Authority's targeted initiatives. The Office promotes improved participation in higher education by students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students with a disability and mature "second chance" students. The Office is developing a national plan to achieve equity of access to higher education in Ireland.

Members of the OECD Review Team presented their report on the future of higher education in Ireland during a special session in Dublin Castle in September 2004.

The report addresses, *inter alia*, measures to increase participation in higher education from all socio-economic backgrounds, part-time, mature and overseas students. The critical importance of lifelong learning in society is also emphasised.

Key recommendations on access and participation are:

- That the proposed new Tertiary Education Authority recognise in its funding formula the additional costs of recruiting and retaining students from disadvantaged backgrounds;

- That every effort be made to increase part-time student numbers as a proportion of total numbers in tertiary education and to this end distinctions between part-time and full-time students be removed for the purpose of the obligation to pay fees and receive maintenance support and that part-time students should count (on a pro rata basis to full-time) for the calculation of recurrent grant;
- That the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities and the Council of Institute Directors jointly address the question of issues surrounding retention, in consultation with the Tertiary Education Authority and make a report.

The report is available on the Department of Education and Science's website - www.education.ie

Young People with Disabilities

People with disabilities are a vulnerable group under the NAP/Inclusion and there is a specific target to increase participation by students with disabilities at third level to 1.8 per cent by 2006. A recent report by the Association of Higher Education Access and Disability showed a first year undergraduate participation rate of 1.4 per cent in 1998/99. Further research on access to third level for people with disabilities is underway. The recent Act for Education for Persons with Special Needs provides a new framework for the assessment of and provision for the needs of children with educational disabilities. The Act provides for the establishment of the National Council for Special Education to co-ordinate special education provision and the provision of Special Educational Needs Organisers to ensure children with special needs receive an appropriate education, and to promote good practice in special education. The provisions of the Act are to be implemented within a period not exceeding five years.