

# **Revised Guidelines for Schools Participating in Early Start**

## **1. Criteria for the enrolment of pupils in Early Start**

### **1.1 Age Requirement**

Children **must** be aged more than 3 years 2 months and less than 4 years 7 months on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of September of the year in which they are enrolled. This age requirement is in line with the age requirement for children participating in the Free Pre-school (ECCE) Scheme, which is administered by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. **A Capitation Grant will not be paid to schools in respect of children who are not within this age range. The only exception will be in the circumstances mentioned at section 3 below.**

### **1.2 Personal Public Service Number (PPSN)**

Children may either be enrolled in Early Start or in the Free Pre-school Year Scheme. Children are not eligible to be enrolled in both schemes at the same time. In order to ensure compliance with this, parents of children in Early Start must supply their children's PPSN's. The PPSN's will be cross-referenced with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. **A Capitation Grant will not be paid to schools in respect of those children who are availing of the Free Pre-school Year Scheme or for whom a PPSN has not been supplied.**

### **1.3 Disadvantage Requirement**

**All of the children in Early Start must be from disadvantaged backgrounds.**

In the case where the number of applications exceeds the supply of places, the children from the most disadvantaged families should be given priority. Each school, having consulted with the Home/School/Community Liaison co-ordinator, local agencies and other relevant authorities, should identify the children from families who are most disadvantaged and encourage their parents to enrol them in Early Start. Priority **must** then be given to the children who are most at risk of not reaching their potential in the education system due to the effects of social/economic disadvantage.

The age requirement and the disadvantage requirement are the only factors that should be considered in the allocation of places for enrolment in the Early Start Programme. **Parents should be made aware of the school's enrolment policy and should be clearly informed that having a child's name on a waiting list does not guarantee a place in Early Start.**

## **2. Length of the School Day and Duration of the Programme**

- 2.1** The length of the school day for children in Early Start is two and a half hours - generally from 9.00 to 11.30 in morning sessions or 12.00 to 2.30 in the

afternoons. Schools should ensure that the benefits of the programme are maximised for children by devising systems to promote regular attendance and punctuality.

- 2.2 Early Start is a one-year intervention programme. It is designed to cater for children in the year before they enter junior infants. Therefore, children should not repeat a year in Early Start except in the circumstances mentioned at 3.3 below. Schools should ensure that there is a smooth transition from Early Start to junior infants at the end of each year.

### **3. Children with special needs**

- 3.1 Children with special needs may be enrolled in Early Start providing they meet the criteria outlined above.
- 3.2 The Department operates a policy that seeks to facilitate, in so far as possible, the integration of children with disabilities into the mainstream system.
- 3.3 If it is the opinion of a professional working in the special needs sector or the principal that a particular child would, on an exceptional basis, benefit either (i) from a waiver of the upper age limit or (ii) from a second year of Early Start prior to joining junior infants, the Department of Education and Skills' sanction must be sought in writing by the school **prior** to the child's enrolment. The Department will examine each application on a case-by-case basis. The child should not be enrolled in the school until formal Department sanction is obtained.

### **4. Selection of staff to work in Early Start**

#### **4.1 Teachers**

Teachers appointed to work in Early Start must be fully qualified, probated primary teachers.

#### **4.2 Childcare workers**

The minimum qualification for childcare workers currently employed in Early Start is a Major Award (qualification) at Level 5 or its equivalent on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in Childcare, Pre-school Childcare or Social Care or equivalent. The minimum qualification for childcare workers who are **recruited with effect from the 1<sup>st</sup> September 2012** is a Major Award in Childcare/Early Education at Level 5 on the NFQ or its equivalent.

### **5. Job Sharing in Early Start**

The conditions governing the job-sharing scheme for teachers are set out in Circulars 32/97 and 4/99. One of the issues a Board of Management is asked to consider before approving a job-sharing application is the class level to be

taught. Paragraphs 3.6, 3.7 and 3.8 of the first Circular, in particular, note that "the welfare and educational needs of pupils [must] take precedence over all other considerations" and that Boards should "take account of pupils who might be regarded as vulnerable or having special needs." The pupils in Early Start fall into this category. Therefore, because of their age, the need for continuity of provision, and the special needs of the pupils, the Department does not consider it appropriate that a Board of Management should sanction a job-sharing arrangement for Early Start.

## **6. Grant Allocations for Schools in Early Start**

The Department allocates the following grants to schools included in the Early Start Pre-school Programme:-

- **€2,539.48** per full unit or **€1,523.69** per half unit per annum for the purchase of materials/equipment
- **€1,904.60** per full unit or **€952.30** per half unit per annum for the development of parental involvement.
- **€95.23** per pupil annual capitation grant to the schools' Board of Management, to be used as funding support for day to day running costs of the centre.

In keeping with Section 18 of the Education Act 1998, the Department requests that schools keep a record of all appropriate materials/resources purchased and activities held with the assistance of these grants and receipts in respect of such purchases and activities should be retained.

School authorities are reminded that the responsibility for sound financial management of the school's affairs rests with the Board of Management.

## **7. Extra Personal Vacation (EPV) Days for Childcare Workers**

Childcare Workers who attend an approved summer course in the area of early childhood education which is directly relevant to their work in Early Start may, subject to the consent of the Board of Management, avail of three extra personal vacation (EPV) days during the subsequent school year. Childcare Workers should verify in advance that the course they propose to attend will be sanctioned for EPV days. The relevant Application Forms can be obtained from the Department of Education and Skills (Early Years Education Policy Unit).

## **8. Parental Involvement**

- 8.1** Parental involvement is a key element of the Early Start project. Schools should devise systems that encourage parents to become directly involved in the planning, organisation and implementation of the work in Early Start. This

is intended to build their capacity and to encourage them to become involved in their children's education.

- 8.2 Post primary students from local schools should also be facilitated to spend part of their time working in Early Start as part of their work experience during Transition year and/or Youthreach and Vocational Preparation and Training Programmes. This will allow them to acquire practical skills in childcare and will also establish role models in retention and achievement in education in the local community. School management must ensure that the appropriate Garda vetting requirements are complied with.

## 9. **Complaints Procedure**

Where the Department receives a written complaint regarding the running of the Early Start Project, the protocol that applies on receipt of any written complaint about a school matter will be followed. In general the stages are:

[a] The people making the complaint are asked, in the first instance, to take up the grievance with the principal.

[b] If they are not satisfied that the matter has been adequately addressed by the principal, they are advised to take the case to the Board of Management. The Board of Management is the body charged with the direct governance of the school, which includes the Early Start Project, and it is appropriate that complaints be directed to the Chairperson of the Board of Management.

[c] If the people making the complaint are not satisfied that the Board has adequately addressed their grievance, they may request the Department to investigate the matter.

[d] The Department will seek written responses from all of the parties involved and may request the school's inspector to investigate, report and make a recommendation on the matter.

[e] Following consideration of all of the written material, reports and recommendations, the Department will reach a determination on the complaint and forward a copy of the outcome to all of the parties involved.

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*March 2012*