Prevention & Early Intervention Series, Focussed Policy Assessment No.4

Educational Welfare

Fiachra Kennedy and Mary Clarke,

Prevention & Early Intervention Unit

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Under *A Programme for a Partnership Government*, the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform has established a Prevention and Early Intervention Unit (PEIU). The focus of the PEIU's work is on prevention and early interventions that can improve the life outcomes of children as well as the quality of life of older people dealing within long term conditions such as chronic illness; which the PEIU is locating within the context of population health.

These types of interventions have a strong common-sense appeal; most people are familiar with the idiom that "prevention is better than cure". However, effective prevention and early interventions rely on both knowing what to do (scientific understanding of cause and effect) and being in a position to act (the capacity of the government to intervene).

The PEIU is undertaking a series of Focussed Policy Assessments on key prevention and early interventions supported by public resources. The approach is to describe each intervention by following a common structure:

- *Rationale* for the intervention;
- *Public resources* provided to support the delivery of the intervention;
- *Outputs and services* provided; and
- *Achievements* of the intervention relative to its stated goal.

As a whole, this series of descriptive reports will provide the evidential base for a thematic consideration of prevention and early interventions in Ireland.

Introduction[1]

For many decades, educational disadvantage in Ireland has been an issue of concern for both policy-makers and researchers. Educational disadvantage encompasses the idea that factors associated with socio-economic status represent impediments to students deriving appropriate benefit from their schooling.[2] It has been defined in Section 32 (9) of the Education Act, 1998 as:

> impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students deriving appropriate benefit from education.

The factors that prevent students from fully benefiting from education are not just associated with family background. In addition, there is a social context whereby the socio-economic mix in a school can impact on student achievement over and above that of their family's socio-economic background.[3]

Ireland has a long-standing policy of establishing initiatives to address educational disadvantage. These initiatives have involved supporting schools that cater for concentrations of children from poor backgrounds, including through the provision of additional resources. (See Box 1.)

The current national-level programme is the Department of Education & Skill's Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). This programme was introduced in the 2006/2007 school year to assist schools with educational disadvantage and operates at primary and post-primary levels.[4] The DEIS compromises an integrated School Support Programme (SSP) which is intended to bring together and build upon existing interventions for schools with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage. The SSP differs from earlier programmes in that it has a greater focus on school planning and on activities designed to boost literacy and numeracy.[5]

The School Support Programme includes two educational welfare interventions: the *Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme* and the *School Completion Programme*. In schools participating in the DEIS initiative, Tusla's Educational Welfare Services have responsibility for the operational management of both school-based support services.[6] The Statutory Educational Welfare Service, itself, encompasses all schools, with Educational Welfare Officers working with young people (and their families) who are experiencing difficulty with school attendance.

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[1] The authors are grateful to colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform for their comments, the Department of Education & Skills for providing additional data and Tusla for providing comments and additional data. The authors are also grateful to Dr Susan Weir and Dr Lauren Kavanagh of the Educational Research Centre for their comments and insights. As ever, all errors and omissions are the authors' responsibility.

[2] Kellaghan, T. 2001. 'Towards a definition of educational disadvantage.' *Irish Journal of Education*. Vol. 32: 3-22.

[3] Sofroniou, N., P. Archer and S. Weir. 2004. 'An analysis of the association between socioeconomic context, gender and achievement'. *Irish Journal of Education*. Vol. 35: 58-72.

[4] Weir, S. 2016. 'Raising Achievement in Schools in Disadvantaged Areas'. In S. Edgar (ed.) *Successful Approaches to Raising Attainment and Tackling Inequality. CIDREE Yearbook 2016*. Livingston: Education Scotland: 75.

[5] Weir, 2016: 82.

[6] In particular, Tusla Education Welfare Service funds the School Completion Programme projects and has responsibility for the CPD and oversight of the work of these projects. The SCP projects all have Service Level Agreements linked to their annual plans.

The Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) was introduced in 1990. Under this Scheme, teachers in DEIS schools are appointed as HSCL Coordinators. In carrying out their roles, Coordinators focus on the most important adults in the life of the young person who is at risk of early school leaving. Home visitations are regarded as central to how Coordinators carry out their role as they are seeking to support the adults in a way that builds their knowledge of the education system, enables them to become active confident participants in their children's learning and stimulates learning in the home. The coordinators also seek to create and develop links between school and the community.[7]

The School Completion Programme was introduced in 2002. The purpose of this programme is to focus on those young people who have been identified as most at risk of early school leaving and students of school going age who have disengaged from schools in order to combat early school leaving. The implementation of the programme is based on clusters of primary and post-primary schools across 124 SCP projects managed by Local Management Committees.[8] The work of SCP projects provide a range of universal and targeted activities designed to meet the needs of identified students. These activities range from breakfast, lunch and after school activities, holiday time provision to in class evidence based supports designed to meet the specific needs of the young people. For some students, small group or one-to-one supports are also provided to address issues such as anger management, the development of social skills, confidence building, motivational coaching and so on.

The purpose of this report is to describe the *educational welfare* programmes in terms of their rationale, the public resources provided, the services delivered and the results achieved. This is one of a series of descriptive reports that taken together will inform a thematic consideration of prevention and early interventions in Ireland.[9]

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[7] Home-School-Community Liaison National Team. 2009. *Submission to the National Economic Forum: Literacy and Social Inclusion*: 1-2. https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Submission_by_Home,_School_Community_Liaison_National_Team.pdf *Accessed*: 14 September 2018; Comptroller & Auditor General. 2006. *Educational Disadvantage Initiatives in the Primary Sector*. Report on Value for Money Examination: 8-9, 32.

[8] Comptroller & Auditor General, 2006: 8.

[9] In drafting this report, the authors only considered publically available information and did not have access to any considerations that might be underway as to how the programmes considered could be developed. As noted this report is part of a series of reports that taken together will inform a thematic consideration of prevention and early interventions in Ireland. As such, within this overall approach the individual reports are not evaluations of the programmes considered and do not seek to arrive at any conclusions or make any recommendations.

Rutland Street Project commenced in 1969 – a preschool established in a disadvantaged area of inner city Dublin to respond to the problem of educational disadvantage.

In 1984, the *Disadvantaged Areas Scheme* was introduce to mainstream measures to address the problem of disadvantage in selected primary schools in cities around Ireland.

Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme - 3 year pilot project in 55 selected primary schools (1990). The pilot was extended to 13 post-primary schools in 1991.

Early Start (1994).

Teacher Counsellor Scheme (1996) later re-named *Support Teacher Project.*

Breaking the Cycle (1997).

Early School Leaver Initiative (1998).

The *Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme* extended to all schools in the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme (1999).

Stay in School Retention Initiative (1999).

The National Educational Welfare Board was established under the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 under the aegis of the Minister for Education & Science. The Act establishes a comprehensive framework for promoting school participation, retention and regular attendance as well as tackling the causes of absenteeism and early school leaving. Under Section 10 of the Act, the National Education Welfare Board was, *inter alia*, charged with "promoting and fostering an environment that encourages children to attend school and participate in school life".

Giving Children an Even Break (2001).

In 2001, an Educational Disadvantage Committee was established to advise the Minister on policies and strategies aimed at eliminating educational disadvantage.

School Completion Programme (2002) – an amalgamation of the *Early School Leaver Initiative* and the *Stay in School Retention Initiative.*

In 2005, the Department of Education & Science published an Action Plan for DEIS. This Action Plan provided for the integration of existing schemes, in particular, the *Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme* and the *School Completion Programme*, within the *School Support Programme.*

In 2007, at the request of the Department of Education & Science, the Educational Research Centre began work on an independent evaluation of the SSP component of DEIS in primary and post-primary schools. The Educational Research Centre was also responsible for the external evaluation of the *Rutland Street Project*, the *Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme*, *Breaking the Cycle*, the *Early School Leaver Initiative* and *Giving Children an Even Break.*

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[10] See: Weir, 2016: 80-81; Department of Education & Science. 2005. *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools – Action Plan*: 30. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/deis_action_plan_on_educational_inclusion.pdf

In 2009, the Government extended the remit of the NEWB in order to develop a single, strategic approach to attendance, participation and retention in school so that it could meet the needs of children at risk of early school-leaving or of developing attendance problems. A core part of this new remit was to integrate the *Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme* and the *School Completion Programme* into the NEWB.

In 2011, responsibility for the National Educational Welfare Board including *School Completion Programme* and *Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme* transferred to the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs from the Department of Education & Skills.[11]

Tusla – Child and Family Agency was formally established on 1 January 2014 (under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013) to provide an integrated service for children and families by bringing together key services from the former HSE Children and Family Services, the National Educational Welfare Board and the Family Support Agency. One of its specific functions is to ensure that every child attends school or otherwise receives an education.

Responsibility for the National Educational Welfare Board transferred to Tusla in January 2014. The purpose of transferring responsibility was to co-locate an integrated educational welfare service within a larger organisation that had a remit to support children and families. (The NEWB was dissolved.)

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[11] National Education Welfare Board (Transfer of Departmental Administration and Ministerial Functions) Order 2011: http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2011/si/215/made/en/print. This Statutory Instrument should be read in the context of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs (Alteration of Name of Department and Title of Minister) Order 2011: http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2011/si/214/made/en/print

Rationale

Tusla's educational welfare prevention and early interventions are primarily concerned with children and young people who are experiencing difficulty with school attendance and are at risk of early school leaving. Early school leaving is a significant social issue in that it can have a significant cost not only for the individual but also wider society as education is a key driver of economic and social success.[12]

Children who attend school regularly are more likely to stay in school and, as a consequence, are more likely to be emotionally, financially and socially secure in later life.[13] Students who encounter difficulties with school attendance not only reduce the quality of their own educational outcomes (with reduced opportunities in the labour market) but can also have a broader impact on the effectiveness of teaching within the class.[14] The importance of school attendance to academic outcomes has been highlighted by Kavanagh and Weir (2018) as part of the programme of evaluation of the School Support Programme under the DEIS programme in urban primary schools. They have found that the school attendance rate was significantly (though weakly) positively correlated with average school achievement at the Third, Fifth and Sixth class levels in both reading and mathematics.[15]

Absenteeism is also a warning sign of early school leaving. Those who leave school early (i.e. at or before lower secondary school[16]) are 5 times more likely than those who had completed third level to be at risk of poverty, 4 times more likely to experience deprivation and 7 times more likely to experience consistent poverty.[17] While *Census 2016* shows that just over 836,000 people living in Ireland had left school early[18] (i.e., highest level of education completed was lower secondary school), it is a behaviour more associated with older generations than younger generations: 52% of those aged 65 years or older had left school early as opposed to 4% of people aged 15-24 years.

From Figure 1 it is clear that the overall trends in school attendance for both primary and secondary schools have remained more or less unchanged in the period since 2011. The average percentage student / days lost for primary schools is just less than 6% while that for second level is just less than 8%. (These equate to about 10½ days on average (or two weeks) for primary school students and almost 13 days on average (or 2½ weeks) for second level students.)

Schools are required to inform the Educational Welfare Service if a student is absent for 20 days or more. The evidence presented in Figure 1 again suggests that the overall trends are relatively unchanged though it is worth noting the increase in 2015/16 in the percentage of primary school students who have breached this threshold. The evidence suggests that on average about 60,150 primary school students and 51,500 secondary school students are absent for 20 days or more each year. (Millar, undated: 5)

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[12] European Commission. 2009. *Progress Towards the Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training: Indicators and Benchmarks 2009.* SEC(2009) 1616final; Psacharopoulos, G. 2007. *The Costs of School Failure: A feasibility study.* European Expert Network on Economics of Education.

[13] National Educational Welfare Board. 2014. *Annual Report 2013*: 9.

[14] Comptroller & Auditor General, 2006: 52-53.

[15] Kavanagh, L. and S. Weir. 2018. *The Evaluation of DEIS: The lives and learning of urban primary school pupils, 2007-2016.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre: 14, 66

[16] This is somewhat different from the legal definition of early school leaving which refers to non-participation in school before reaching the age of 16 years or before completing 3 years of post-primary education, whichever is later.

[17] See: http://pdf.cso.ie/www/pdf/20180316124231_Survey_on_Income_and_Living_Conditions_2016_full.pdf

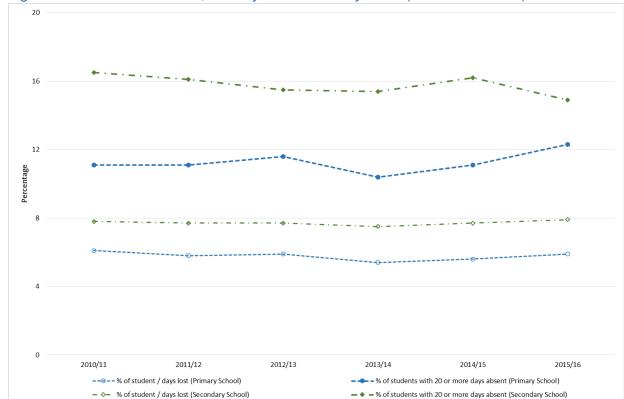[18] *Census 2011* found that 956,000 people in Ireland had left school early.

Figure 1 – School Attendance, Primary and Secondary Level (2010/11-2015/16)

Legend:
- --○-- % of student / days lost (Primary School)
- --●-- % of students with 20 or more days absent (Primary School)
- --◇-- % of student / days lost (Secondary School)
- --◆-- % of students with 20 or more days absent (Secondary School)

Source: D. Millar. Various Undated. *School Attendance Data from Primary and Post-Primary Schools* http://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tusla_Annual_Attendance_Report_2014-2015.pdf and https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/School_Attendance_Data_2015-16.pdf

Student attainment is used to describe the extent to which students have been retained in the education system until various levels or benchmarks have been reached.[19] As virtually all students now attain primary-level education, much of the focus in recent times has been on monitoring trends in completion levels of the two state examinations at post-primary level. The retention rate refers to the percentage of students who entered the first year of the junior cycle in a particular year and completed a particular benchmark (e.g. the Leaving Certificate Examination). The Junior Certificate Examination is currently completed by about 97% of the cohort entering post-primary school. The Leaving Certificate Examination is currently completed by about 91% of the cohort entering post-primary school.[20]

It is clear from Figure 2 that in overall terms the retention rate to the Leaving Certificate has been very stable in recent years (averaging just over 91%). That said, over the last two decades there has been a notable increase in retention rates. The retention rate for the 1997 cohort was 82.3% while that of the 2004 cohort was 87.7%. (The methodology was revised in 2005 and as such there is a break in the time-series.) McAvinue and Weir (2015) have compared trends in retention rates to both Junior and Leaving Certificates.[21] When all schools

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[19] Student achievement is used to refer to outcomes resulting from the administration of tests, including standardised tests used by schools as well as the results of state examinations.
[20] Weir, 2016: 75-76.
[21] McAvinue, L. and S. Weir. 2015. *The Evaluation of DEIS at Post-Primary Level: An update on trends over time in achievement and retention levels*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre. At the time of writing, a new report by Kavanagh and Weir, using more recent data, is to be published by end-2018.

are considered, they found that for both Junior and Leaving Certificates there were significant positive trends over time.

From Figure 2 it is also evident that retention rates in non-DEIS schools are greater than those in DEIS schools. However, over the period considered in Figure 2, the retention rate in DEIS schools has increased by just over six percentage points and the lag to non-DEIS schools has been reduced from 13 percentage points amongst the 2005 cohort to 8.5 percentage points amongst the 2010 cohort. This change is particular noticeable given McAvinue and Weir's (2015: 11) finding that amongst the 1995 cohort the retention rate in non-SSP schools was almost 23 percentage points greater than was the case in SSP schools.
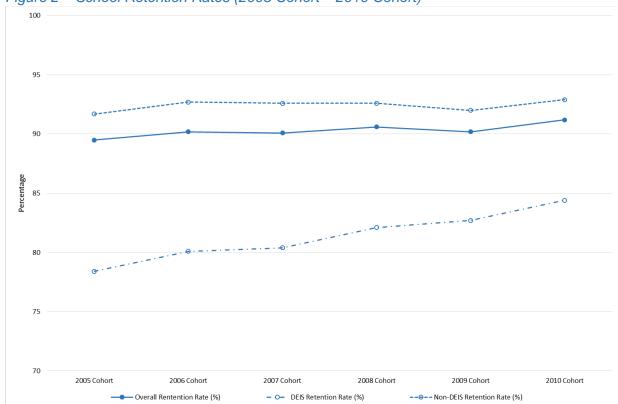
Figure 2 – School Retention Rates (2005 Cohort – 2010 Cohort)

Source: Department of Education & Skills. 2017. *Retention Rates of Students in Second-Level Schools: 2010 Cohort*. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/retention-rates-of-pupils-in-second-level-schools-2010-entry-cohort.pdf

The different rates of change evident in Figure 2 are supported by McAvinue and Weir (2015) who have found that while non-SSP (non-DEIS) schools had significantly higher levels of retention to both Junior and Leaving Certificates when compared to SSP (DEIS) schools, the latter were found to show a significantly higher rate of growth over time. While the absence of a control group makes it impossible to attribute improvements among SSP schools to participation in DEIS, they have stated that it is possible to conclude that there has been an overall improvement in schools nationally, that the improvement is more marked in DEIS schools than in non-DEIS schools, and that the data are "suggestive of a significant change in trend around the time that the DEIS programme might have been expected to have its first impact".[22]

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[22] McAvinue and Weir, 2015: 19.

Resources

Figure 3 sets out expenditure for each of the programmes within Tusla's educational welfare interventions. Over the last decade or so, these programmes have accounted for an average of €60.7m a year. It is worth noting that during the economic and financial crisis aggregate expenditure on these programmes (an average of €64m for 2009-13) was greater than before the crisis (an average of €61.8m for 2006-08) and as the economy began to recover (an average of €56.7m for 2014-18).
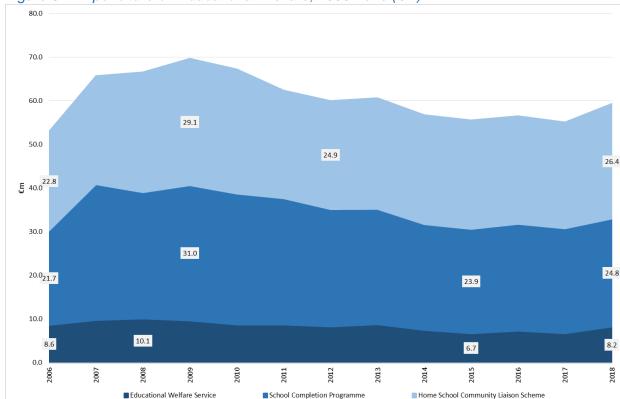
Figure 3 – Expenditure on Educational Welfare, 2006-2018 (€m)

Source: (a) 2006-13 – Educational Welfare Service and School Completion Programme - Comptroller & Auditor General. Various Years. *Audited Appropriation Accounts.* (b) 2014-17 – Educational Welfare Service – Data provided by Tusla. 2018 – Tusla (c) 2014-2017 – School Completion Programme - Tusla. Various Years. *Annual Financial Statement.* 2018 – Tusla. (d) 2006-2018 – Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme – Data provided by the Department of Education & Skills.

Educational Welfare Service

The Educational Welfare Service operates from 31 locations across 4 regions. Each of the regions is led by a Senior Manager who has a number of Senior Educational Welfare Officers (SEWOs) who manage teams of Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs). Over the last couple of years, the number of EWOs has increased notably from a long term average of around 70 w.t.e. to 89 w.t.e.[23]

Over the last decade or so, expenditure on the Educational Welfare Services has accounted for an average of €8.3m a year. About four-fifths of this expenditure is accounted for by pay

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[23] See: (a) 2006-07 – National Educational Welfare Board. Various Years. *Annual Report*; (b) 2011-2014 – Response to PQ13646/14 http://www.parliamentary-questions.com/question/13646-14/; and (c) 2015-17 – Tusla. Various Years. *Integrated Performance and Activity Report.*

for Educational Welfare Officers, Senior Educational Welfare Officers, Regional Managers, Corporate Management and Administrative Grades. While in more recent years average expenditure on this programme (€7.3m for 2014-18) has been less than it was both during and prior to the economic and financial crisis (€9.1m for 2006-13), it is worth noting that some €8.2m has been provided for 2018, a sum more or less in line with the long-term average.

Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme[24]

While the HSCL Scheme is managed and coordinated by a national leadership team within Tusla, the Department of Education & Skills remains responsible for the allocation of HSCL Coordinators to schools.

Over the last decade or so, this programmes has accounted for an average of €25.7m a year. During the economic and financial crisis average expenditure on this programme (€26.6m for 2009-13) was greater than before (€25.1m for 2006-08) and after the crisis (€25.1m for 2014-18). Expenditure in this area is primarily pay for 416 HSCL Coordinators who serve 633 primary and post-primary schools. The number of coordinators has increased from its long-term average of 400 as the Scheme has been extended over the last couple of years and is expected to be in the region of 416 to 420 by end-2018.

In addition to these funds, under the HSCL Scheme, HSCL Coordinators have access to a HSCL Grant to schools.[25] This funding comes from the school's DEIS Grant and it is a requirement that a minimum of 10% of this be made available to the HSCL Coordinator for use on HSCL activities. (If 10% of the DEIS grant is not sufficient, the school should use its discretion as to the appropriate amount of funding from the DEIS grant that should be provided to operate the HSCL service). It is intended that these resources are used to support the implementation of activities that are consistent with the principles of the HSCL scheme. For 2018/19, the DEIS Grant for urban primary and post-primary schools was some €13.75m with about €1.375 of this being made available to HSCL Coordinators.

School Completion Programme

Over the last decade or so, this programme has accounted for an average of €26.3m a year. During the economic and financial crisis average expenditure on this programme (€28.7m for 2009-13) was greater than before (€27.2m for 2006-08) and after the crisis (€24.3m for 2014-18).

The SCP is organised into 124 local SCP "clusters" or projects, each of which includes both primary and post-primary schools. These projects employ 248 full-time, 627 part-time staff and over 2,211 sessional and other staff. The SCP is being implemented in 470 primary schools and 224 post-primary schools.[26] Pay for full-time and part-time staff equates to about 60% of expenditure on this programme. A significant proportion of the remainder is used to pay sessional and contract staff to deliver interventions.[27]

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[24] Data provided by the Department of Education & Skills.
[25] *Guidelines on the appropriate use of the DEIS Grant in DEIS Primary and Post-Primary Schools.* https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/deis_funding_guidelines.pdf
[26] Tusla. *School Completion Programme.* https://www.tusla.ie/services/educational-welfare-services/school-support-services-under-the-deis-initiative/school-completion-programme/ *Accessed*: 14 September 2018.
[27] Tusla gathers data on staff directly employed by School Completion Projects but not on contracted or sessional staff.

At the national level, the SCP is supported by a Senior Manager who supports local project development and monitoring of local retention plans and financial governance arrangements.

Figure 4 shows that there are variations in the total amounts provided to the various SCP projects. For the most part, payments to projects under the SCP are less than €250,000 (90% of payments). The typical payment is between €175,000 and €200,000 with 59% of all payments between €100,000 and €200,000. Six projects are in receipt of more than €300,000 and for the most part these are located in Dublin.
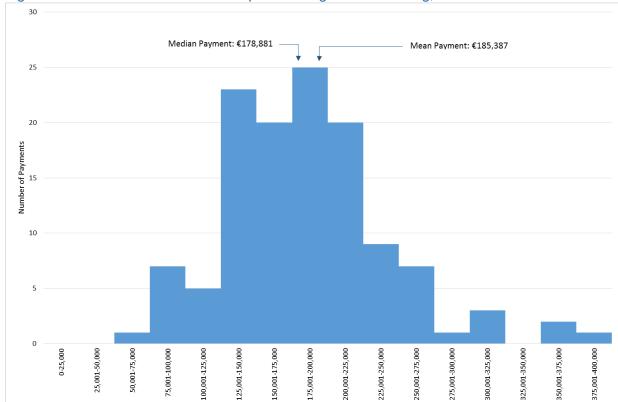
Figure 4 – Distribution of School Completion Programme Funding, 2018/19

Source: Tusla.

While information is not available on expenditure for each young person targeted, an earlier review by the Comptroller & Auditor General (that also identified large variation in funding of clusters) found that average expenditure ranged from €248 to €8,285 per pupil. The explanation offered was that costs can vary significantly depending on the qualifications and experience of personnel as well as the cost of the interventions required (some may require multiple interventions over an extended period).[28]

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[28] Comptroller & Auditor General, 2006: 26-27.

Outputs and Services

Educational Welfare Service

Under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) work with children and young people who are experiencing difficulty with school attendance. The main priority is on ensuring that concerns and problems around attendance are addressed before attendance becomes a crisis issue. In addressing these types of challenges, EWOs seek to find solutions within a collaborative intervention framework involving children, their families, schools and other relevant agencies.

When a young person is referred to the Educational Welfare Service by a school, parent or another agency, the EWO assesses the nature, scope and depth of the problem and then provides an intervention to address the attendance challenge.

Figure 5 provides a summary overview of the Educational Welfare Services (EWS) Case Flow across three separate years. The evidence suggests that the EWS has achieved a gradual reduction in its ongoing caseload (from almost 4,000 in at the start of 2008 to just over 3,000 at end-2017). The EWS's ability to reduce its case load depends on it closing more cases than are opened in a particular year. In the years illustrated in Figure 5, on average, the EWS closed slightly more cases (4,860 cases) than were added to its caseload (4,583 cases).

Figure 5 – Educational Welfare Services Case Flow, 2008, 2015 and 2017

Source: National Educational Welfare Board. 2009. *Annual Report 2008*. 2015 and 2017 – Tusla. Various Years and Quarters. *Integrated Performance and Activity Report*. *Note*: The 2015 data is based on an aggregation of Brief Interventions and Cases as reported by Tusla. The 2008 and 2017 data refers to cases (i.e. the reports do not differentiate between Brief Interventions and Cases).

However, in Figure 5 it is also notable that there is no clear trend in the number of closed cases. While the number of cases closed in 2015 was 20% greater than it was in 2008, the

number of cases closed in 2017 was 39% less than that achieved in 2015. This is not associated with either the number of cases at the start of the year (starting caseload more or less the same) or the number of new cases added to the case load (the number of new cases in 2017 was 28% lower than the number of new cases in 2015).

On occasion, a child or young person's non-attendance at school becomes sufficiently serious that the Educational Welfare Services has to commence a more formal legal approach to addressing the issue. The legal proceedings that are initiated are taken against a parent or guardian for failing to ensure that their child receives an education.

The first step in this process is to issue a School Attendance Notice (SAN). When a SAN has issued, the EWO begins a formal monitoring process of the child's situation, and the parent or guardian is afforded extensive opportunity to address the underlying issues with the EWO and the school. Additional support may be offered to the family from other agencies and services.

Figure 6 sets out the number of SANs issued and court proceedings undertaken as well as the number of children to which these referred. Over the period, there has been a general upward trend in the number of SANs issued; an increase of 126% between 2009 and 2016/17. Over the same period, the number of summonses issued increased by 92%. While this reflects an increase in the legal work undertaken by the EWS, it is also evident that there is an increasing number of children who are engaging in very serious levels of non-attendance. The number of children on whose behalf SANs were issued has increased by 188% while the number of children on whose behalf summonses were issued has increased by 122%.

The imposition of sanctions on parents or guardians for their child's non-attendance is the responsibility of the court, further to normal court proceedings.
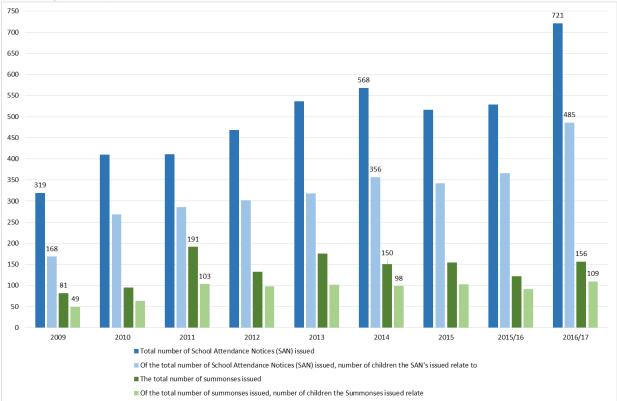
Figure 6 – Actions under Section 25 of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 (during the reporting period)

Source: 2009-2013 – National Educational Welfare Board. Various Years. *Annual Report.* 2014 – Tusla. 2015-2016/17 – Tusla. Various Years. *Integrated Performance and Activity Report.*

School Completion Programme

The School Completion Programme (SCP) predominantly serves school communities participating in the DEIS strategy but is also available in a number of non-DEIS schools. At present, the SCP is organised into 124 clusters and each of these includes a number of primary and post-primary schools.

The SCP is a "bottom-up" approach with different supports offered in each cluster depending on local needs, an approach that recognises how local factors can influence early school leaving. (A "whole school" approach is sometimes utilised in order to mitigate against the risk of stigmatising young people at risk of early school leaving.)[29]

Each of the local SCP Projects has a Local Co-ordinator who leads the implementation of the SCP Retention Plan. The role of the local coordinator is to work with the individual schools to identify pupils in need of additional support and to manage the delivery of these supports through the SCP Retention Plan.

The SCP Retention Plan includes appropriate educational interventions and actions in support of the targeted young people identified as most at risk of early school leaving and is made up of four main strands or 'pillars':

- In-school provision;

- After-school provision;

- Holiday provision; and

- Out of school provision.

Smyth et al.'s (2015a: 51-67) review of the SCP found that there was significant diversity in the kinds of supports provided.[30] In particular, they found that interventions were more frequently provided within the school day (though coordinators reported that they would like to see a greater emphasis on holiday and after-school provision) but that a significant group of clusters had a diverse provision that combined activities across the four SCP pillars.[31] In terms of the types of services provided within each of the pillars, Smyth et al. have found that:

- In-school provision – A mix of one-to-one support from SCP personnel, group work and mentoring from SCP staff.

  - *Primary* - The most commonly provided supports were the transition programme, attendance tracking, and one-to-one work and support to foster personal development.

    Almost 80% of clusters provided literacy programmes while around 50% provided mathematics supports.

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[29] Department of Education & Science. Undated. *Aims and Principles of the School Completion Programme.* https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Aims_and_Principles_of_SCP.pdf

[30] E. Smyth, J, Banks, A. Whelan, M. Darmody and S. McCoy. 2015a. *Review of the School Completion Programme.* Research Series Number 44. Dublin: ESRI.

[31] In terms of other differences in provision, Smyth et al. noted that rural clusters were less likely than urban clusters to provide after-school activities (perhaps reflecting geographical dispersion) and that rural clusters were more likely to focus in-school provision on formal learning difficulties at both primary and post-primary level.

In over half of clusters, therapeutic interventions, behaviour programmes, family support and breakfast clubs were provided.

- o *Post-Primary* - The most commonly provided activities included attendance tracking, transition programmes, one-to-one work and personal development programmes.

  Breakfast and lunch clubs were more likely to be provided within second-level schools than at primary level.

  There was somewhat greater provision of mathematics support than was the case for primary schools but less provision of literacy programmes.

  Mentoring was more prevalent and there was a slightly greater emphasis on behaviour programmes and counselling than was the case for primary schools.

- After-school provision - Homework clubs were seen as providing facilities for students who would not otherwise have a quiet space in which to do homework. This was viewed as contributing to engagement by removing homework non-completion as a source of friction between teacher and student.

  - o Over four-fifths of clusters reported having homework clubs in one or more of their primary or second-level schools. (More than three-quarters of clusters had after-school clubs at primary level while over 60% had clubs at second-level.)

    Seventy per cent of clusters reporting having study support in place for second-level schools.

  - o Sixty per cent of clusters reported having sports programmes for primary schools; over half of clusters reporting having them for second-level schools.

  - o In a significant minority of clusters, parental support was a feature of after-school provision and was more frequently reported in relation to primary schools.

- Holiday provision was seen by staff and stakeholders as a way of enhancing relationships between young people and school and ultimately contributing to school engagement. Holiday provision tended to place much less emphasis on formal learning activities and only in a minority of clusters were specific literacy and numeracy programmes provided.

  - o *Primary* - The most frequently provided holiday programme was a "fun camp" followed by sports programmes and trips.

    A transition camp aimed at sixth class students was provided in around 40% of clusters.

  - o *Post-Primary* - The most frequently provided activities were trips, fun camps and sports programmes.

- Out-of-school provision – The main focus was on identifying and linking with key agencies and providing information and support to the young person and their family regarding educational options.

- Four out of five clusters indicated that they provided out-of-school provision for those who have left mainstream education and had one or more children or young people being catered for at the time of the survey.

- Recreational activities also formed an important component of out-of-school provision.

- Around half of the clusters concerned provided support for a return to school.

- A minority of clusters reported providing specific activities focused on formal learning.

Figure 7 sets out how those engaged in SCP activities allocate their time. The data for 2003/04 is taken from a report by the Comptroller & Auditor General on educational disadvantage. The data for 2015 is taken from Smyth et al.'s (2015) report on the SCP. Unfortunately, the surveys underlying both sets of data are not comparable, so neither are the distributions (that is, they do not reflect a trend over time).
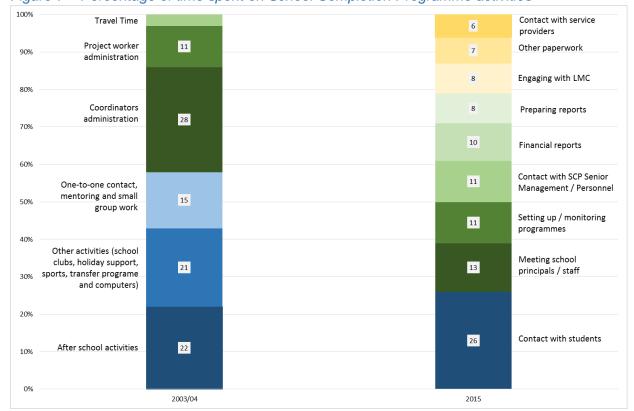
Figure 7 – Percentage of time spent on School Completion Programme activities

Source: A certain level of caution should be exercised with regard to percentages presented here as the data is based on self-reported descriptions of activity and there are likely to be concerns about the validity and reliability of the data. (a) 2003/04 – Comptroller & Auditor General, 2006: 67-68. This data is derived from a survey of the timetables of staff in five SCP clusters. (b) 2015 – Smyth et al., 2015: 82-83. This data is derived from a survey of SCP Coordinators who were asked to estimate the time they usually spent per week on a range of specified tasks and activities.

The 2003/04 data suggests that staff who provided SCP interventions spent more than half of their time delivering SCP supports with the remainder given to administration. The main focus of SCP supports was on after school activities and various types of one-to-one contact or

group work. Another notable share of their time was allocated to a broad range of other student based activities. While a sizeable share of time was consumed by administrative work, the distinction between providing supports and administration was not always clear-cut as time was often spent recording and updating student profiles, maintaining attendance tracking records and providing input to reports on individual arising from case conferences and other inter-agency activities supporting the needs of the targeted young people.

The 2015 data suggests that SCP coordinators spent just over a quarter of their time in direct contact with students. On face value, it would appear that a lot of the rest of their activity was allocated to organising and managing SCP interventions. For instance, another quarter of SCP coordinators' time was spent in schools meeting with principals and staff or setting up and monitoring SCP programmes, about a sixth of their time was taken up engaging with SCP senior management, other SCP personnel and service providers while a similar amount of time was given to writing reports or financial reports.

Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme

The Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) works at the preventative and universal level by enabling parents to become active participants in their children's education (acknowledging them as the primary educator).

The HSCL Scheme is managed and coordinated by a national leadership team of Senior Managers, on secondment to Tusla through the Department of Education & Skills who support the development of the HSCL Scheme at school, family and community level to ensure that service delivery is prioritised in accordance with the DEIS strategy.

HSCL Coordinators are released from all teaching duties and engage in full-time liaison work between the home, the school and the community. The types of initiatives provided under the HSCL Scheme for students and parents include literacy and numeracy initiatives, the provision of information on issues such as transfer from primary to post-primary schools, health issues, and parenting skills.

The work carried out by the HSCL Coordinator fits into two main categories of activity: working in partnership with parents and creating links between school and the community. (A third category relates to administrative tasks that support the delivery of the main work of coordinators). It should be noted that collecting data and describing what people do "on average" is complex and fraught with difficulty and the purpose of Figure 8 is to provide a summary of published data on the activities of HSCL coordinators.[32] Furthermore, the categories, as set out in Figure 8 are a means of describing groups of activity but are not especially apt in terms of how the HSCL Scheme is implemented as it is focused on the interrelationships between all three domains (home, school and community).

The first category of activity is working in partnership with parents. Central to the HSCL Scheme is that parents are the first and most important educators of their child. The HSCL Scheme aims to empower parents to become active participants in their children's learning and to stimulate learning in the home.

The evidence presented in Figure 8 suggests how HSCL coordinators engage with parents has shifted away from "home visits" towards making contact with them in other settings or more indirectly by working with groups of parents at courses or meetings.

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[32] Weir, S., L. Kavanagh, E. Moran and A. Ryan. 2018. *Partnership in DEIS schools: A survey of Home-School-Community Liaison coordinators in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland.* Report to the Department of Education & Skills. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

Figure 8 – Breakdown of HSCL coordinator's time[33]

	Home Visits	Work with groups of parents	Contact with individual parents (other than home visits)	Contact with pupils	Liaison with agencies in community	Liaison with staff in schools	Administration	Other
2017	18.6	18.6	13.4	3.8	10.4	12.2	18.5	4.6
2001	26.3	15.8	10.1	2.5	8.0	14.3	18.9	3.8

Source: Author's calculations based on data presented by Weir et al. (2018: 21) who have noted that they have concerns regarding the validity and reliability of the data as a result of issues regarding the quality of the responses received.

This change of practice is interesting in the broader context of how home visitation has been regarded as being at the heart of the HSCL Scheme. While there are issues regarding the data, the evidence nevertheless suggests a certain amount of drift from the original focus on home visits, in particular, the recommendation that coordinators spend at least one third of their time on home visiting. Visiting parents at home is intended to build bonds of respect and trust between home and school, in particular, building parents' knowledge of the education system and their confidence in supporting their child within it.[34] This work is seen as especially

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[33] Weir et al. (2018: 20-22) present mean percentages of time allocated by coordinators to various tasks based on surveys conducted in 2001 and 2017. The data that they present is based on the allocations reported for 205 coordinators for whom the total percentages were not less than 80% and not greater than 120%. In this paper, the data presented by Weir et al has been rescaled so that for each year it sums to 100 and the main tasks have been grouped as follows: (a) "Home Visits", "Contact with pupils" and "Other" is unchanged; (b) "Work with groups of parents" encompasses "working with a core group of parents", "organising courses for parents", "acting as course presenter or facilitator on courses for parents", "organising activities for parents (e.g. coffee mornings)" and "enabling parents as class supports"; (c) "Contact with individual parents (other than home visits)" encompasses "informal and/or incidental meetings with parents" and "individual formal meetings with parents (outside the home)"; (d) "Liaison with agencies in the community" encompasses "meeting with agencies or individuals from the community", "contacts with agencies or individuals from the community" and "liaison with therapists / counsellors"; (e) "Liaison with staff in schools" encompasses "meetings / contact with school principal", "meetings / contact with teachers" and "policy formation in the school"; (f) "Administration" encompasses "planning, monitoring and evaluating your work", "arranging funding", "administration / paperwork", "cluster meetings" and "organising or helping to organise after school educational activities".

[34] Home-School-Community Liaison National Team, 2009: 2.

important in the case of marginalised parents who may not be as familiar with the school system, who may defer to the professionalism of the teacher and who do not see a role for themselves in the education of their children.[35]

Ryan's (1994: 73-74) evaluation of the HSCL Scheme has found that amongst HSCL Coordinators home visits were seen as important to building deeper relationships with parents, providing a link between school and home for teachers, making contact with all parents especially those who otherwise would not come to the school and building deeper relationships with parents. However, home visits were perceived by Coordinators as making a lesser contribution to issues relating to the children, in particular, their educational achievement and attendance at school.

The second type of activity is focused on creating links between school and the community. From Figure 8 it is evident that while has been little change in the share of time given by HSCL coordinators to liaising with schools and other agencies in the community it is perhaps worth noting that there has been a slight decrease in the share of time given to the former and a slight increase in the share of time given to the latter. As part of this broader level of engagement, the HSCL Scheme operates Local Education Committees that comprise parents, other agencies, community groups, teachers and students. The purpose of the Local Education Committees is to identify and address issues in the community that impinge on children's learning and life in the community. Furthermore, HSCL Coordinators meet regularly at local level to share best practice and receive and share training and professional development.

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[35] The HSCL Scheme works to support parents who may have been early school leavers, have had negative experience of the school system, believe themselves to be failures in the school system or have little belief in their capacity to contribute to their child's education.

Goals and Achievements

The focus on educational disadvantage and provision of educational welfare interventions have been long-standing elements of policy and research in Ireland. While the Department of Education & Science (2005: 22) has noted in its DEIS Action Plan that one of the weaknesses of earlier programmes was an "insufficient focus on target-setting, measurement of progress and outcomes", over the last decade there have been important changes, in particular, the Educational Research Centre's evaluations of the School Support Programme. These evaluations have highlighted the impact that such interventions can have, and while the focus is on educational achievement rather than attainment, it is nonetheless worth keeping in mind Kavanagh and Weir's (2018: 68) conclusion that their findings:

> …illustrate that adaptable features of the home environment make independent contributions to reading and mathematics achievement, indicating that there are ways in which parents can by usefully advised to support their children's literacy and numeracy development at home, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

There has also been significant research on factors that contribute to early school leaving. This research indicates that early school leaving is complex and multifaceted[36] and is a consequence of a cumulative process of disengagement that occurs over time.[37]

Educational Welfare Service

The goal of the Educational Welfare Service is to secure better educational outcomes for children and young people. While this reference to educational outcomes is ambiguous, Tusla notes that the main priority of Educational Welfare Officers is around the welfare of children and young people and on ensuring that concerns and problems around attendance are addressed before attendance becomes a crisis issue.[38]

This paper has already set out trends in school attendance and school completion rates. (See Figures 1 and 2.) However, these are more relevant as context metrics (that set out the rationale for these types of intervention) rather than as measures of effectiveness. The data presented above refer to all students, and not just those who have interacted with the Educational Welfare Service, the School Completion Programme or the Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme. As Smyth et al. (2015a: 19) have noted, in general, there has been a lack of systematic evaluation of preventative measures that are targeted towards at-risk students and those which are designed to bring about an improvement in schools overall.[39]

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[36] Individual factors include the pupil's own behaviour, attitudes and academic performance as well as social background (e.g. past experiences of the pupil and family members, health, socio-economic status). School and systemic factors include the structure and practices of schools.

[37] Dowrick, P.W. and N. Crespo. 2005. 'School failure'. In T.P Gullotta and G.R. Adams (eds.) *Handbook of adolescent behavioural problems: Evidence-based approaches to prevention and treatment*. New York: Springer Science and Business Media; Lyche, C. 2010. *Taking on the Completion Challenge: A literature review on policies to prevent dropout and early school leaving*. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 53. Paris: OECD Publishing; European Commission. 2013. *Reducing Early School Leaving: Key Messages and Policy Supports. Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving*. Brussels: European Commission.

[38] Tusla website: https://www.tusla.ie/services/educational-welfare-services/ and https://www.tusla.ie/services/educational-welfare-services/service-strands/ *Accessed*: 21 September 2018.

[39] The breadth of the challenge is evident in Downes' (2011) examination of the international evidence on the dimensions of young people's experiences (and available interventions): (a) attendance (monitoring and follow-up of absenteeism); (b) behaviour (focusing on conflict resolution and alternatives to punitive disciplinary measures within schools); (c) emotional / mental health (the

The next two sub-sections of this paper focus on educational attainment, in general, and the School Completion Programme and the Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme, in particular. The final sub-section extends the scope somewhat to look at educational achievement. In doing so it notes how many of the factors that the SCP and HSCL Scheme seek to support in terms of educational attainment have significant impacts on educational achievement.

School Completion Programme

The School Completion Programme aims to improve the quality of participation and educational attainment of targeted young children and young people in the education process.[40] In terms of how it is implemented, the SCP discriminates positively in favour of children and young people who are at risk or who are experiencing educational disadvantage in order to have a significant positive impact on levels of pupil retention in primary and secondary schools and on the number of pupils who successfully complete the Senior Cycle

In their review of the SCP, Smyth et al. (2015a: 133-134) asked coordinators and chairpersons of School Completion Programmes about the extent to which they considered that the activities in their cluster had impacted on a range of outcomes:

- *Increasing attendance* - more than 70% of respondents felt that the programmes activities had "to a great extent" made a positive impact. (Chairpersons were much more likely to have a positive view of this than coordinators.)

- *Preventing early school leavers* - respondents were more likely to be positive about the programmes impact on younger second level students:

    - about 70% felt it had "to a great extent" increased retention at junior cycle

    - about 45% felt it did so at senior cycle.

- *Contributing to positive school experience* and *Supporting a successful transition from primary school* - Just over 80% of respondents felt that it had "to a great extent" influenced positive school experience and making a successful transition.

- *Reducing exclusions* and *Enhancing parental involvement* - respondents were less likely to be as positive - about 40% of respondents felt that it had "to a great extent" reduced exclusions while less than a third felt that it had "to a great extent" enhanced parental involvement.

While it is important to take account of the views of those who are delivering the programme, what is required is an understanding of the impact of the programme on participants. As Smyth et al. (2015a) have noted, their review of the SCP highlights the need for better

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availability of within and outside school supports such as counselling); (d) cognitive achievement (additional learning supports for SEN groups or those experiencing academic difficulties); (e) language / multi-culturality (language supports for parents and children); (f) motivation (recognition of achievements through an award system); (g) social (after-school clubs); (h) family (family literacy programmes and outreach to families with specific difficulties); (i) physiological (breakfast and lunch clubs); (j) transitions (programmes to facilitate the move from primary to post-primary school). [Downes, P. 2011. *Multi/Interdisciplinary Teams for Early School Leaving Prevention: Developing a European Strategy Informed by International Evidence and Research*: NESET (Network of Experts on Social Aspects of Education and Training).]

[40] Department of Education & Science. Undated. *Aims and Principles of the School Completion Programme.* https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Aims_and_Principles_of_SCP.pdf

understanding of its impact on student outcomes and recommended further research to facilitate a rigorous assessment of the impact of the programme on a range of student outcomes using a longitudinal study.

In response to this recommendation, there has been a significant refocusing of the SCP programme. Since 2016, Tusla's Educational Welfare Service has undertaken a comprehensive CPD programme for all SCP staff, revised the Retention Plan template, conducted a rigorous evaluation of SCP plans, provided feedback and support to SCP sites where plans required revision and /or improvement, and developed and rolled-out a national SCP intake framework.

While not related to educational attainment, given the emphasis within the SCP on homework clubs and after school activities, it is important to note that in their evaluation of the School Support Programme under the DEIS programme in urban primary schools, Kavanagh and Weir (2018) have found that both reading and mathematics achievement are statistically significantly lower amongst those who attend homework clubs than is the case for those who do not do so.[41] While Kavanagh and Weir do not provide any further consideration of this finding, it has been noted that homework clubs tend to be found in schools serving concentrations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and this poor performance is likely to be as a consequence of their socio-economic background than the homework club. In this context, it is also worth noting a more general point about how the social context effect may be exacerbated by unstructured recreational activities and that participation in such activities is associated with high levels of problem behaviour among youths.[42]

Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme

In *The Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme in Ireland: From Vision to Best Practice*, the HSCL Coordinators stated that:

> The underlying policy of the Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme is one that seeks to promote partnership between parents and teachers. The purpose of this partnership is to enhance pupils' learning opportunities and to promote their retention in the education system. In addition, the HSCL Scheme places great emphasis on collaboration with the local community. The HSCL Scheme is the pioneer in involving the school in the life of the community and involving the community and its agencies in the life of the school.

The goals of the Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme are to:

- Maximise active participation of the children in the schools of the scheme in the learning process, in particular those who might be at risk of failure;

- Promote active cooperation between home, school and relevant community agencies in promoting the educational interests of the children;

- Raise awareness in parents of their own capacities to enhance their children's educational progress and to assist them in developing relevant skills;

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[41] Kavanagh and Weir, 2018: 33, 58-64.
[42] Weir, S., D. Errity and L. McAvinue. 2015. 'Factors associated with educational disadvantage in rural and urban areas'. *Irish Journal of Education.* Vol. 40: 107-108.

- Enhance the children's uptake from education, their retention in the educational system, their continuation to post-compulsory education and their attitudes to life-long learning; and

- Disseminate the positive outcomes of the scheme throughout the school system generally.[43]

There have been a number of reviews of the HSCL Scheme. Ryan's (1994) evaluation of the programme indicated improved parental involvement in the school and increased contact between parents and teachers (improved attitudes to school, greater trust of school personnel, increased attendance at parent-teacher meetings and greater confidence in approaching school and teachers).[44] The perception is that these visits are effective because "when parents see that the school wants to support the family it tends to help forge strong relationships between parents and the school".[45] However, Ryan (1994) has also found that there was less evidence of parents becoming more involved in the educational activities of their children, especially at post-primary level.

Later, Ryan (1999) concluded that the Scheme was seen as having had a greater impact on attitudes than behaviour, and less impact on students themselves.[46] This view that the HSCL Scheme has an impact beyond the children and young people who are directly involved, may be reflected in the OECD's (1997) statement that the experience of the HSCL Scheme, which it cited as "a good example of innovative central government initiatives", is an example of how:

> educational initiatives based in schools can raise the educational level of the adults involved, and result in a general sense of empowerment in the local community. Parental involvement, especially in areas of socio-economic deprivation, does not just benefit the children and the school - it is a crucial aspect of lifelong learning.[47]

Archer and Shortt (2003: 91) have found that the majority of principals and coordinators were positive about the scheme but also concluded that:

> what might be regarded as affective outcomes (pupils' attitude to and experience of school) are described as having occurred to a greater extent, by both groups, than are outcomes to pupils behaviour, attendance or performance.[48]

Weir et al. (2018: 33-34) surveyed HSCL coordinators in primary and post-primary schools in 2017. The data indicate that coordinators are positive about the scheme. In particular, a majority of coordinators felt that their work had its strongest impact on the willingness of parents to engage with their child's school (visit the school, feel less threatened by school and teachers, new interest in what is happening in school) and on their awareness of how they can contribute to their child's education. It is worth noting that the coordinators in primary schools were more likely than their colleagues in post-primary schools to regard their impact

[43] Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme. Undated. *Goals of the Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme*.
https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Goals_of_the_Home_School_Community_Liaison_Scheme.pdf
Accessed: 14 September 2018.
[44] Ryan, S. 1994. *The Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme - Final Evaluation Report.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre.
[45] Comptroller & Auditor General, 2006: 33.
[46] Ryan, S. 1999. *The Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme. Summary Evaluation Report (revised edition).* Dublin: Education Research Centre.
[47] Department of Education & Science, 2005: 40.
[48] Archer, P. and F. Shortt. 2003. *Review of the Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme. Report to the Department of Education and Science.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre: 91.
http://www.erc.ie/documents/hsclreview03.pdf

as being to "a great extent". On the other hand, when it came to helping with "school activities" (e.g. sports days, school tours and classroom activities such as paired reading), coordinators were a lot more likely (ranging from 18% to 30%) to indicate that their work had no impact on parental involvement. Again there was a very clear difference between those in post-primary schools who were a lot more likely to feel that their activities had no impact on parental involvement in school activities (ranging from 42% to 70%) than their colleagues in primary schools (4% to 6%).

In these evaluations, the authors have noted that the evidence they present is limited in that it is based on the views of people who are directly involved in the implementation of the scheme. In acknowledging the limitations of the evidence that they presented, Archer and Shortt (2003: 91-93) recommended that there would be value in putting in place procedures for monitoring the educational achievement and attainment of pupils and students from HSCL schools.

Factors Impacting on Educational Achievement

While there are few evaluations of the impact of these educational welfare interventions on student attainment, many of the factors that are supported by these interventions have been shown to have a significant impact on student achievement (e.g. the impact of home, school, and individual pupil factors).[49]

Kellaghan (2001) has noted how a supportive home environment in which education is highly valued and educational resources are plentiful is likely to foster the development of competencies and dispositions that facilitate a child's adaption to school. One of the most enduring findings in studies of achievement at primary level in Ireland is that students from better-off families and with parents who have higher levels of education outperform those from poorer families and those with parents of lower levels of education.[50] Studies in Ireland have also identified a social context effect in that student achievement is negatively affected by increasing densities of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.[51]

Archer and Weir (2005) have reviewed the international and Irish evidence of the impact of educational disadvantage interventions on student achievement.[52] They have found little evidence that the pre-DEIS programmes had an impact on achievement as measured by standardised tests; with the exception of the follow-up study of the HSCL scheme (Ryan, 1999). That said, the schemes have tended to be positively evaluated by those directly involved. Teachers have cited the benefits associated with smaller junior classes such as increased individual attention to pupils, easier identification of individual pupils' needs and improved teacher ability to respond effectively to the learning needs of pupils. Archer and

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[49] Weir (2016: 23) has noted that the Educational Research Centre's ongoing evaluation of the SSP was designed with the imposed constraint of not being in a position to establish a control group at primary level. It was not possible to identify a matched control group of schools with similar levels of disadvantage as participating schools had been pre-selected. However, even if this had been possible, it would not have been ethical to withhold treatment from pupils who had an identified need. Despite this limitation, it has been possible to compare DEIS outcomes with national reading and mathematics norms at primary level. At post-primary level, the evaluation used data on all students nationally to compare attainment and achievement in DEIS and non-DEIS schools.
[50] Weir, 2016: 80.
[51] Weir, 2016: 80.
[52] Archer, P. and S. Weir. 2005. *Addressing Disadvantage: A review of the international literature and of strategy in Ireland. Report to the Educational Disadvantage Committee.* Dublin: Department of Education & Science / Educational Disadvantage Committee. Also see S. Weir, L. Kavanagh, C. Kelleher and E. Moran. 2017. *Addressing Educational Disadvantage: A review of evidence from the international literature and of strategy in Ireland: An update since 2005.* Dublin Educational Research Centre.

Weir (2005, 21-23) have noted that these programmes had in part been undermined by implementation failures such as not delivering a promised professional development for teachers in the intended way or an advisory service that was to support teachers in maximising the use of additional resources.

Weir et al. (2015) have examined achievement of pupils in SSP schools in both rural and urban settings and found that achievement was higher for students with greater access to educational resources within the home, those with more positive attitudes towards school and those who tended not to spend as much time socialising with their peers after school. Weir et al. (2015) have also found that there appears to be a stronger emphasis on education within rural homes (parents reported reading books more frequently and having higher educational levels than parents in urban areas).

Kavanagh, Shiel and Gilleece (2015) have identified a range of home background, school, and individual pupil factors that impact on reading and mathematics outcomes. In line with the international literature, they have found that higher achievement is associated with higher socioeconomic status (SES) and parental educational level, family structure, homes that provide a greater range of educational resources, individual pupil characteristics (e.g. positive attitudes towards school and reading, high educational aspirations) and engagement in extracurricular activities but with limited access to technology.[53]

Kavanagh and Weir (2018) have also found that achievement in reading and mathematics was associated with home background characteristics and home climate variables such as parents' employment, the number of books in the home[54], expectations for educational attainment, and engagement with their child's learning as well as pupils' attitudes, aspirations and whether or not they liked reading and/or mathematics. (See Box 2 and 3 for a summary of those factors that had a statistically significant impact on Third class reading and mathematics achievement.)

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[53] Kavanagh, L., G. Shiel, and L. Gilleece. 2015. *The 2014 National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics. Volume 2: Context report.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre.
[54] In surveys, the number of books in the home is an often-used proxy for 'educational home atmosphere'. Pupils from homes with more books and greater frequency of reading tended to have better achievement outcomes. (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018: 2)

Pupils who had more than 250 *books at home* had a higher reading score than pupils with 11-50 books at home, all else being equal.

Pupils who *read books for pleasure* once or twice a week, once or twice a month or hardly ever/never had at a lower reading score than pupils who did so every day/almost every day. (In contrast, reading magazines or comics for fun *less frequently* was associated with *higher* reading achievement.)

Pupils who were members of a *homework club* had a lower reading score than pupils who were not, after accounting for the effects on achievement of other variables in the model.

Pupils who *aspire to attend college or university* had a higher reading score than pupils who did not.

Pupils whose *parents expect them to attend college or university* had a higher reading score than those whose parents did not have this expectation.

Pupils whose parents indicated that they *read to the child* every day/almost every day before they started school outperformed pupils whose parents did so a few times a week or a few times a month.

Pupils whose parents indicated that their *child read aloud* to them every day/almost every day when learning to read outperformed pupils who did so a few times a week, a few times a month and those who did so hardly ever or never.

Pupils in schools characterised by principals as having very low *parental support for pupil achievement* had significantly lower reading scores than pupils in schools with medium levels of parental support.

Source: Kavanagh and Weir, 2018: 58-65.

Compared to the reference category of pupils with 11-50 *books at home,* pupils who had more than 250 books at home had a higher mathematics score while those with no books at home had a lower mathematics score.

Pupils who *liked mathematics* scored higher than those who did not.

Pupils who were members of a *homework club* had a lower mathematics score than pupils who were not.

Pupils who *aspire to attend college or university* scored higher than those who did not.

Reading magazines or comics for fun *less frequently* was associated with *higher* mathematics achievement.

Pupils whose parents indicated that their *child read aloud* to them every day/almost every day when learning to read outperformed pupils who hardly ever or never.

Pupils whose *parents expect them to attend college or university* had a higher mathematics score than those whose parents did not have this expectation.

Pupils in schools characterised by principals as having very low *parental support for pupil achievement* had significantly lower mathematics scores than pupils in schools with medium levels of parental support.

Source: Kavanagh and Weir, 2018: 58-65.

Quality Assurance Process

To ensure accuracy and methodological rigour, the authors engaged in a quality assurance process that involved Department of Public Expenditure & Reform line management and taking account of observations received from Tusla and comments and insights from Dr Susan Weir and Dr Lauren Kavanagh of the Educational Research Centre. As ever, all errors and omissions are the authors' responsibility.