

# **Review of overage exemptions for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme**

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Údarás Náisiúnta Míchumais  
National Disability Authority

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## Executive summary

### Background

The **Early Childhood Care and Education (hereafter ECCE) programme** was introduced in 2010 and was the first free universal early education programme in Ireland. When the **ECCE** programme was introduced it contained no additional provision or supports for children with disabilities but it did facilitate children with disabilities by allowing them to either commence **ECCE** later and / or spread their 'year' over two years. Where either of these accommodations involved a child participating on **ECCE** programme above the programme's upper age limit (5 years and 6 months) an application had to be made to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Such applications became known as **ECCE** overage exemptions.

In December 2017, a decision was taken to cease the process of **ECCE** overage exemptions. The decision was made by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs with the Department of Education and Skills. It was made after collaboration with members of the **Access and Inclusion Model (hereafter AIM)** cross-sectoral implementation group, including representatives from the National Council for Special Education, the National Disability Authority and the HSE, representatives of parents of children with special needs and a representative of early years providers.

The decision was taken in light of the developments in the **ECCE** programme and the supports in place for children in primary schools. Of particular relevance were the roll-out of **AIM** (a programme of universal and targeted supports for children with disabilities in **ECCE**) from September 2016 and the announcement that from September 2018 all children would have two programme years of **ECCE**. The decision essentially was based on the view that the offer from September 2018 for all children was greater than that which had been offered to those who had availed of an **ECCE** overage exemption and that developments had, therefore, rendered **ECCE** overage exemptions redundant.

Also, the **ECCE** overage exemptions did not support the policy aim that children should transition to primary school with their peers.

However, the decision prompted stakeholders to raise concerns and the Minister therefore paused the proposed change to allow for a wider consultation, to include in consultation with parents of children with disabilities and special needs.

## Consultation process

The consultation process, on the proposed changes to the rules on overage exemptions in the **ECCE** programme, was jointly led by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills, with the assistance of the National Disability Authority, who were asked to conduct an independent review.

The National Disability Authority has compiled this report based on the published research evidence, details of arrangements for similar processes in peer jurisdictions, findings of the survey of parents who are currently availing of the an **ECCE** overage exemption and follow up interviews and findings of the Open Policy Debate. The report is for the consideration by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills.

Following receipt of this report the two Departments will consider the outcome and prepare policy proposals for the two Ministers.

## Findings

Engagement with parents of children who have an **ECCE** overage exemption was central to this review. Parents interviewed were extremely positive about the impact which the **ECCE** overage exemption had on their child's development. Many parents described how in their experience a lack of information and disjointed and inadequate service provision (delayed or inadequate access to assessments and therapeutic interventions in particular) had contributed to their child requiring an **ECCE** overage exemption. Parents interviewed believed very strongly that their child was not ready for school in September 2017, with many saying that they would not have started their child in school even if their application for an **ECCE** overage exemption had been turned down.

Parent interviews and survey results highlighted that most parents' concerns were focused on their child's 'school readiness' or their child's disability or development delay more than on schools' capacity to meet their child's needs. Less than half of the parents surveyed had engaged with an educational professional (teacher, principal or Special Education Needs Organiser) for advice on the possible advantages and disadvantages of their child not progressing to school with his or her age peers.

Many interviewees emphasised the things that their child would not have been able to do in September 2017, which ranged from writing to being mature enough to understand the implications of their allergy but most frequently it related to sitting down and concentrating or 'staying on task'. While some interviewees mentioned the importance of play and of **Aistear** most emphasised the pressure on the child to have certain skills in the school context. This

perhaps raises questions about how schools' capacity to support children with a variety of support needs is communicated to parents. It perhaps also raises questions about how the curriculum and pedagogical approach used in the early years of primary school is communicated to and understood by parents.

Parents' survey responses highlight a number of interesting considerations. Parent survey respondents' use of the **ECCE** overage exemption appeared in the vast majority of cases not to be in line with the original intention of the arrangements. As set out originally, the **ECCE** overage exemption was not intended to provide additional provision but rather accommodate children with a disability by allowing them to start **ECCE** later or spread their 'year' of Early Childhood Care and Education over two programme years.

However, survey responses (and follow up interviews) suggest that the **ECCE** overage exemption has become a means for children with a disability, delay or health condition to access an additional **ECCE** programme year. The majority of interviewees confirmed that when they enrolled their child in **ECCE** they had no intention of applying for an **ECCE** overage exemption but that they subsequently came to the view that their child was not ready for school in September 2017 and applied for one.

This finding is significant for two reasons. Firstly, at some point after it was introduced the **ECCE** overage exemption appears to have evolved and become primarily about additional provision for children already in **ECCE**. Secondly, the function or need which the **ECCE** overage exemption is meeting is different to that which appears to have been in mind by those who introduced it.

This suggests that if **ECCE** overage exemptions are to continue in some form after September 2018 (when all children will have two full programme years of **ECCE**) there is a clear need for a re-statement of what the **ECCE** overage exemption actually is; what are the needs it is trying to address; and, what evidence and values and policy goals are informing its operation.

The vast majority of children in the survey sample were still going to be 6 or less in September 2018. These children's birth month meant that they would be over 5 and 6 months finishing **ECCE** at the end of June 2018 but would be less than six starting school. This suggests perhaps that **ECCE** overage exemptions are partly a disability issue and also partly a birth month issue. A number of interviewees emphasised the birth month issue. Some interviewees also suggested that the requirement that children getting an **ECCE** overage exemption have a disability be dropped. Again, this suggests perhaps that if **ECCE** overage exemptions are to continue in some form after September 2018 a re-consideration and re-statement of the purpose of **ECCE** overage exemptions is required.

Available administrative data from the Department and Children and Youth Affairs and Pobal showed that just under 500 children have an overage exemption in the 2017 – 2018 **ECCE** programme year. Two thirds of these children have no targeted AIM supports and the vast majority are attending **ECCE** five days a week. 46% of 2017 – 2018 **ECCE** overage exemption recipients were categorised having a “Speech and Language” disability.

The survey responses suggest that the figure of 46% recorded as having a “Speech and Language” disability in the Administrative Data may not adequately reflect the fact that children may have a disability or development delay in more than one area. However, it is nonetheless the case that the need for support around communication is a factor for many of the children with an overage exemption. This raises questions perhaps around how children with communication issues are supported in **ECCE** settings and in primary school and how this is communicated to parents.

Pre-school staff appear to be very central in terms of provision of information and advice on **ECCE** overage exemptions to parents. Research has shown that many Irish early years professionals believe that children in general should go to school later than Irish children typically do<sup>1</sup>. Advice on **ECCE** overage exemptions as reported by survey respondents typically related to the child’s lack of ‘school readiness’ or the manifestations of his or her development delay rather than how these might be supported in the school context. Advice on any possible disadvantages of availing of an **ECCE** overage exemption (and thereby being older than classmates throughout the child’s full school journey) was rarely given to parents. A concerning finding is that some survey respondents indicated that pre-school staff provided them with initial information on **ECCE** overage exemptions but never discussed **AIM** supports with them.

A clear policy position, backed up by available evidence, on ideal school starting age in the context of the Irish education continuum which is communicated to all the stakeholders working in the early childhood environment may be part of what is required to address this issue.

A review of redacted **ECCE** overage exemption application files showed that these largely contain statements of the child’s disability, delay or health issue in hugely varying degrees of details ranging from no more detail than “speech issue”, “speech delay” or “concerns about development” to extensive medical

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<sup>1</sup> Ring, E., Mhic Mhathúna, M., Moloney, M., Hayes, N., Breathnach, D., Stafford, P., Carswell, D., Keegan, S., Kelleher, C., McCafferty, D., O’Keeffe, A., Leavy, A., Madden, R. and Ozonyia, M. (2016) **An examination of concepts of school readiness among parents and educators in Ireland**. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

descriptions. However, regardless of the level of detail of the child's disability, delay or health issue the files generally contained no information on the challenges that the child would face in a school context.

Any administrative system for deciding on whether or not a child should be granted an **ECCE** overage exemption will face the challenge of balancing being rigorous and not being onerous on parents or professionals. The current system correctly or incorrectly appears to set a relatively low threshold for supporting evidence in terms of the level of detail required and, perhaps more importantly, a lack of clarity on what question those providing reports are supposed to be answering.

Data from the Department of Education and Skills shows that while retention (keeping children back in a class year) still occurs the number of students being retained continues to decline. Moreover, departmental circulars have set out a process for how retention is to be managed.

There is a dearth of peer reviewed literature which directly answers the exact question which the National Disability Authority sought to investigate: do children in pre-school who do not progress to school with their age peers have better or worse outcomes than children who do progress. There were two bodies of literature which provide partial answers to this question. The literature on retention (keeping children back a class year) including retention of young children is extensive and unequivocal. Outcomes for retained students are negative. Studies of children as young 5 to 6 year olds (kindergarten age children in the US) show that retention is experienced negatively by children and that retention does not result in long-term academic gains.

The other body of literature reviewed was studies which focus on delaying school entry beyond the typically age range (referred to by the American term 'redshirting' in most of the literature). The 'redshirting' literature shows more mixed short-term outcomes than the retention literature. However, the 'redshirting' literature is from the US and whether or not the children who commence or delay school entry are in or have been in good quality early years programmes is not controlled for in much of the literature.

In the absence of Irish studies of outcomes for children who are retained in pre-school when their age peers progress to school (or at least more directly comparable studies) the available published literature on retention and 'redshirting' suggest that the approach to **ECCE** overage exemptions should be one of caution.

Arrangements for managing retention in pre-school beyond the standard age range / deferrals of school starting year in comparable jurisdictions (USA, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and New Zealand) were reviewed.

In most of the jurisdictions the rules on school starting age and state funded early years care and education completion age were aligned (which is not the case in Ireland).

Education authorities tended to have responsibility for early years provision so structures for pre-school and primary provision, and in particular supports for children with disabilities / special education needs, tended to be more aligned than they are in Ireland. Children with disabilities, particularly for those with a diagnosed disability, typically had a plan for education supports which covered both pre-school and primary.

The US (in some States) use standardised 'school readiness' tests but in other jurisdictions a 'team around the child' approach is used. This approach focuses on providing joined up information and support around the transition to school as well as making / informing any decision on pre-school retention / school deferral. Where there is a pre-school retention / school deferral granted it is typically linked to a plan with agreed goals for the child for the additional pre-school year.

In some countries those deferring school entry beyond the standard pre-school age range are not automatically entitled to additional free pre-school provision.

Key informants in the jurisdictions with whom the National Disability Authority engaged emphasised that:

- in their jurisdiction there is broad agreement that it is in the best interests of children to move on to school with their peers, except in very exceptional circumstances
- there is unlikely to be any perfect system for determining which children meet those very exceptional circumstances criteria
- key to getting the approach right is supporting children and parents in the transition to school and in particular having people (key workers or other professionals) who can reassure parents that schools can adequately support their child's development

The National Disability Authority engaged with stakeholders from the education, health and early year sectors to hear their views on **ECCE** overage exemptions. Education stakeholders focused on the challenges faced by all children and families in the pre-school to school transition and the additional challenges faced by children with disabilities and their families. It was noted that difficulties around transitioning into primary schools were highlighted in a recent Economic and

Social Research Institute report<sup>2</sup>. At present, primary school teachers receive little information about a child's skills and challenges when they start school.

Education stakeholders believed that as long as pre-school to primary school transitions are disjointed and parents (of children with disabilities) are not supported then transitions will be stressful for parents and children and **ECCE** overage exemption applications will continue to be one manifestation of this. Therefore, the focus should be on supporting transitions and on developing 'ready schools' rather than focusing on whether children are 'school ready' or not.

Education stakeholders noted that Ireland has moved from a position of having no universal pre-school provision to having one year to now having two years of universal pre-school provision (from September 2018) incrementally over a fairly short period of time. The expansion of provision now means that the continuum of state-funded education now begins at approximately 3 years of age. Given that this is the new continuum of education the implications for how information on children is shared, how supports needs are assessed and planned for, how supports are aligned in this new scenario needs to be worked out.

Health stakeholders expressed the view that children should progress to school with their age peers except in highly exceptional circumstances. Health stakeholders cautioned against the idea that there should or could be a standardised 'disability assessment' which could determine which children should or should not be granted an **ECCE** overage exemption.

Early years providers expressed the view that some children are not ready for school by the time they reach the **ECCE** programme upper age limit and that such children benefit from additional time in an early years settings. This again highlights the different views on 'school readiness' held by different stakeholders in the Irish context.

An Open Policy Debate attended by parents, early years professionals, primary school teachers, HSE clinicians working with young children and others considered the advantages and disadvantages of the **ECCE** overage exemption and possible future arrangements.

At the Open Policy Debate participants suggested that explaining the purpose of the **ECCE** overage exemption more clearly was required, as was work on defining the criteria and rules for application. Also, that the **ECCE** overage

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<sup>2</sup> Smythe, E., 2018, **The transition to primary education: insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study**, ESRI

exemption process should be linked to the **AIM** Access and Inclusion Profile of the Child to ensure that it is determined by the needs of the child.

Furthermore, it was suggested by Open Policy Debate participants that **AIM** could be a mechanism to provide supports for a transition plan from pre-school into primary.

Another proposal from the Open Policy Debate was that ‘whole of early years’ communications approach, which places the child and their parent at the centre, was required so that navigating supports across Health, Children’s and Education sectors is less confusing for parents, and parents of children with disabilities in particular.

Of some possible options presented at the Open Policy Debate an option which allowed all children to have two programme years of **ECCE** but increased flexibility for parents by allowing them to choose which September they would start their child in (2.5 to 3.5 depending on birth month) was identified as the preferred option, though participants were not asked to endorse any option.

Overall, Open Policy Debate participants were inclined to the view that the **ECCE** overage exemption should be retained for a short, defined period of time while improvements to the system were made. At the Open Policy Debate there was,

‘considerable consistency in the issues identified as requiring attention. As the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme itself develops, and there is positive and planned transition of children from pre- to primary school as standard practice, then it was anticipated that the need for **Early Childhood Care and Education** overage exemptions would reduce.’

It should be noted however, that some parents interviewed expressed the view that even in a more joined up system, with better supports for transitions, that some children would not be ‘school ready’ after two years of **ECCE** and that there would always be a need for some flexibility for some children. Other parents believed that with timely access to appropriate supports (both within and beyond the **ECCE** setting) that their child would have been able to go to school with his or her age peers after two years of **ECCE**.

The provision of two full programme years of **ECCE** from September 2018, therefore, does not appear to be sufficient to reduce the perceived need for **ECCE** overage exemptions **in the absence of other measures**.

Key findings of this review which will be important to reflect on when considering future options on the **ECCE** overage exemptions are that:

- Many parents' experience the supports available to young children with disabilities as fragmented. Some parts of the system are difficult to access in a timely way or even to find information on, which results in some parents believing that their child missed support at a crucial stage which contributed to them not being ready to progress to school with his or her age peers
- Parents surveyed and interviewed had significant concerns about their child's 'school readiness' but had differing views of what skills or attributes were required in school. Only half of those surveyed had sought advice from an Educational professional before applying for an **ECCE** overage exemption
- In addition to concerns about perceived 'school readiness' some parents were concerned about pedagogy or approach to teaching in schools and the expectations they believed would be placed on their child in that context
- Transition planning processes for all children from pre-school to school in Ireland are underdeveloped but as the points above demonstrate, parents of children with disabilities have additional concerns and information requirements and need access to information and support around transitions
- **Pre-school practitioners** appear to be key providers of information and advice on **ECCE** overage exemption. Other research has shown that many **pre-school practitioners** believe that a school starting age, which is older than the average Irish school starting age of 4 to 5 years, is preferable
- **AIM** supports and the **ECCE** overage exemption process are not connected. Approximately, two thirds of **ECCE** overage exemption recipients do not have **AIM** supports. Some survey respondents were given information on **ECCE** overage exemptions by pre-school staff but said that **AIM** supports were never discussed with them
- The **ECCE** overage exemption appears to now primarily meet the need of parents who start their children in **ECCE** with their age peers with the intention of sending them to school with their age peers but who subsequently decide that their child needs additional time in **ECCE** to prepare for school

- Support around communication and language development is a factor for a significant proportion of children who currently have an **ECCE** overage exemption
- The available evidence from the peer reviewed literature suggests that there should be a cautious approach to children with disabilities not progressing along the education continuum with their age peers. However, most of the peer jurisdictions reviewed had processes for dealing with **exceptional cases** where children do not progress to school with their age peers. A ‘team around the child’ approach was typically central to informing or deciding decisions on those exceptional cases.

## 2. Background and context

### Government policy on early education

The White Paper on Early Childhood Education **Ready to Learn (1999)** is concerned with children from birth to 6 years. It sets out the core objective of early childhood education as 'supporting the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with particular focus on the target groups of the disadvantaged and those with special needs'

**Siolta**<sup>3</sup> - the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education was published in 2006. The Early Years Education Policy Unit of the Department of Education and Skills manages the implementation of **Siolta**.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has developed **Aistear** - the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, for children from birth to 6 years of age. This framework, published in 2009, describes the types of learning that are important for children of this age group and sets out broad learning goals for all children. It can be used in the range of early childhood settings, including children's own homes, childminding settings, full and part-time day care settings, sessional services and infant classes in primary schools. The Framework uses four interconnected themes to describe the content of children's learning and development:

- Well-being
- Identity and Belonging
- Communicating
- Exploring and Thinking

### Early Childhood Care and Education programme (ECCE)

Early childhood education generally means education before the start of formal schooling or before the age at which children are generally required to attend school. It covers the period from birth to 6 years.

The **ECCE programme** provides early care and education for children of pre-school age. It is a universal programme available to all children within the eligible age range. It provides children with their first formal experience of early learning prior to commencing primary school. In general, the provision amounts to 3

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<sup>3</sup> **Siolta** is designed to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings where children aged birth to six years are present. See [www.siolta.ie](http://www.siolta.ie)

hours per day, 5 days a week over 38 weeks for children enrolled in participating playschools. There are currently three points of entry throughout the programme year – September, January and April. The number of entry points will revert to one at the beginning of the new programme year in September 2018.

Childcare services taking part in the **Early Childhood Care and Education programme** must provide an appropriate pre-school educational programme. This educational programme must adhere to the principles of **Síolta**. While all childcare settings are regulated by the Early Years Inspectorate in Tusla, early-years services participating in the **Early Childhood Care and Education programme** are inspected by the Early-Years Education-focused Inspections. The Early-Years Education-focused inspections focus on processes and practices relating to children’s learning in the **Early Childhood Care and Education setting**.

### **Early Childhood Care and Education age requirements and Overage exemption**

Children are eligible to attend pre-school and avail of the **Early Childhood Care and Education programme** on reaching 3 years of age (2 years 8 months from September 2018). Under the rules of this programme there is a requirement, that children availing of it, must not turn 5 years and 6 months before the end of June of the programme year.

Children with special and/or additional needs have been able to apply for an overage exemption, beyond the upper age eligibility (5 years 6 months) for the **Early Childhood Care and Education programme**. The overage exemption was introduced at the outset when the **Early Childhood Care and Education programme** started in 2010.

**“There is no entitlement under the programme to any additional provision.** The programme does, however, include a number of provisions to take account of children with special needs. These include an **exemption from the upper age limit** for qualification under the programme where a child is developmentally delayed and would benefit from starting primary school at a later age. In addition, children with special needs can apply to have the pre-school year **split over two years on a pro**

**rata basis**, for example availing of the scheme for 2 days a week in the first year and for 3 days a week in the second year”<sup>4</sup>

As set out originally the **Early Childhood Care and Education** overage exemption involved **no additional provision**. Rather, it was two accommodations (a later starting age and / or one ‘year’ split over two) to assist children with disabilities to participate in **Early Childhood Care and Education**.

Approximately five hundred children have availed of the overage exemption each year since then.

**Exemptions** to the **Early Childhood Care and Education** upper age limit are only allowed where the child has been assessed by the HSE, or a ‘treating consultant, as having special needs which will delay their entry to school’<sup>5</sup>. Applications for such exemptions need to be accompanied by a letter of recommendation from a medical specialist for an extra year of ECCE. Examples of medical specialists include:

- Speech and Language Therapist
- Occupational Therapist
- Senior Psychologist
- Physiotherapist
- Paediatrician / developmental Neurologist
- Psychiatrist
- Psychotherapist
- Cardiologist
- Oncologist

The **Early Childhood Care and Education** overage exemption was never intended to conflict with the legislative requirement for a child to start school by

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<sup>4</sup> Dr James Reilly TD, Minister for Health and Children, 4<sup>th</sup> of May 2011  
<http://debatesarchive.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail2011050400119?opendocument>

<sup>5</sup> Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016, CHILDCARE FUNDING PROGRAMMES: INFORMATION AND FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS. Updated: 28th July 2016  
<http://www.fingalcountychildcare.ie/index.php/childcare-documents/19-information-childcare-funded-programmes-and-faqs-2016/file>

age six. The compulsory age of primary school attendance in Ireland is six years of age.

It should also be noted that the application process for an exemption from the upper age limit for the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme was introduced within a context where:

- The **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme was for one year only and
- Where the **Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)** had yet to be introduced

### Access Inclusion Model (AIM)

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs has worked to improve the pre-school experience for children with disabilities and to optimise their early development. The **Access and Inclusion Model** was introduced in 2016 with 7 different levels of progressive support ranging from universal (Levels 1-3) to targeted (Levels 4-7) for children with disabilities. Over four thousand children have so far benefitted from targeted supports and many multiples of this from universal supports available under **AIM**.



Figure 1 AIM Supports Level 1-7

The **Access and Inclusion Model** is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with a disability can access the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme. Its goal is to support early years providers to deliver an inclusive pre-school experience. **AIM** is a child-centred and evidence-based model, involving seven levels of progressive support, based on the needs and strengths of the child and the early years setting. Supports provided under **AIM** include:

- the development of an inclusive culture
- enhanced continuing professional development for early years practitioners
- the provision of equipment, appliances and grants for minor alterations
- access to therapeutic intervention and increased capitation for early years providers in the case of children with very complex needs

**AIM** is designed to support children to access the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme. The child must qualify on age grounds for the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme and the early years provider must be registered with Tusla and hold an active Department of Children and Youth Affairs contract to deliver the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme. The only exception to this is where the child qualifies for the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme and is availing of early childhood care and education services funded under another Department of Children and Youth Affairs childcare programme, such as, the **Community Childcare Subvention (CCS)** or **Training and Education Childcare (TEC)** programmes.

In its first year, **AIM** provided two thousand four hundred and eighty-six children with four thousand seven hundred and sixty targeted supports to ensure that they could fully participate in the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme. In the current programme year, **AIM** has provided three thousand seventy-one children with four thousand four hundred and seventy-four targeted supports to date.

## **Better Start**

**Better Start** is an initiative of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, in collaboration with the Early Years Education Policy Unit of the Department of Education and Skills and Pobal to establish a single, cohesive approach to quality across the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland. The broader aim of **Better Start** is to bring coordination, cohesion and consistency to the provision of state funded quality supports and to work in alignment with

statutory systems, that is, regulation and inspection, in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector.

**Better Start** is comprised of three pillars:

1. City and County Childcare Committees.
2. National Voluntary Childcare Organisations.
3. National Early Years Quality Development Service.

Under the **Access and Inclusion Model**, it also provides expert advice, mentoring and support to providers and practitioners from specialists in early years care and education for children with disabilities.

### **Developments from September 2018 in the Early Childhood Care and Education programme**

From September 2018, all children meeting the minimum age requirement of 2 years and 8 months will be eligible for a full two programme years on the **ECCE** programme. The upper age requirement is that the child must not reach 5 years and 6 months before the end of the programme year.

This extension to the **ECCE** programme from September 2018 refines the development introduced last year, whereby, three intake dates were adopted and it will increase the duration of each registered child on the **ECCE** programme from a current average of 61 weeks, to a potential duration of 76 weeks (two full programme years). This enhancement delivers fully on a commitment in the **Programme for a Partnership Government** that is good for children, families and Early Years providers.

This new measure will also address the situation where there was a wide range in the number of pre-school weeks a child could avail of – between 61 and 88 weeks – and will ensure a programme that is equitable for all children.

The number of entry points will revert to one at the beginning of the new programme year in September 2018. One enrolment period at the start of the pre-school year will support quality service provision principally by making it easier for services to provide continuity of staffing through the programme year. The single enrolment will also help streamline the administration process and will make it easier for childcare providers to operate and budget for the programme year. This will also make it easier for parents to secure places on the **ECCE** programme for their children.

## Legislation for school attendance in Ireland

The legislation governing school attendance in Ireland is the **Education Welfare Act 2000**. Parents are required to ensure that their children from the age of 6 to the age of 16 attend a recognised school or receive a certain minimum education.

Article 42 of **Bunreacht na hÉireann** (the Constitution) acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the family and guarantees to respect the right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children. Parents are free to provide this education in their homes or in schools recognised or established by the State.

The law and policy on school start-age is clearly established in Ireland. Most children in Ireland start their first-level education in primary schools (also called national schools) at the age of 4 or 5 years of age. Legally, children can be enrolled at primary school from the age of 4 upwards and must have started their formal education by the age of 6 years. The primary school cycle is 8 years long. Schools generally have 2 years of infant classes, followed by class 1 to class 6. Children with special educational needs are generally educated in mainstream schools.

Children should be in school by the time they are six and the primary school system has a variety of resources to support children with disabilities.

If children are not in school by 6 years of age, under the **Education Welfare Act 2000**, the Educational Welfare service of Túsla (the Child and Family Agency) must be satisfied that the child is receiving a minimum standard of education in a place other than at a recognised school. Tusla does this by sending Educational Welfare Inspectors out to the place of the child's education.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs states that the guiding principle with regard to a child's participation in pre-school and primary school is the best interests of the child. In keeping with this best interest principle, children should:

- Participate in inclusive mainstream settings (both pre-school and primary) (unless there is a compelling argument for a specialist setting), and

- Transition from pre-school to primary school with their peers with appropriate supports provided by the relevant primary school, the NCSE and other bodies as required<sup>6</sup>

## **Department of Education and Skills supports in primary school for children with special educational need**

The Department of Education and Skills is committed to ensuring that all children, including those with learning disabilities and/or mental health issues, can have access to an education appropriate to their needs, preferably in school settings through the primary and post primary school network.

The Department of Education and Skills provides for a continuum of special education provision to be made available, so that, regardless of the level of need of the child, educational provision can be made for them.

The policy of the Department is that children should be included in mainstream placements with additional supports provided where necessary. The extent of supports required for any child in a particular class setting or school will depend on their individual learning needs and the extent of care needs that they may have. In circumstances where children with special educational needs cannot be accommodated in mainstream education, they may be enrolled in special classes or special schools where more intensive and supportive interventions are provided.

Funding for special education provision in 2018 amounts to some €1.75 billion and includes the provision for supports, such as:

- Over thirteen thousand four hundred Special Education Teaching posts in mainstream primary and post primary schools for the 2017/2018 school year, to provide additional teaching support to pupils with special educational needs
- Fifteen thousand Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) which will be available for allocation to primary, post primary and special schools for the new school year, this is one thousand and ten more posts, or a 7% increase, in the number of posts which were available last year

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018, Press release: '**Department of Children and Youth Affairs Ministers Zappone and Bruton announce details of the consultation process on 'overage exemptions' to the ECCE programme**'. Tuesday 6th March, 2018

- Over one thousand one hundred teachers in one hundred and twenty-five special schools, including education provision in Hospital schools and HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMHS) Units
- Approximately one thousand four hundred and forty special classes, which includes one hundred and forty new special classes to be opened in September 2018. This compares to five hundred and forty-eight special classes in 2011, an increase of 162%
- Enhanced capitation grants for special schools and special classes attached to mainstream schools
- Teacher training and continuing professional development in the area of special education through the Special Education Support Service (SESS)
- Special school transport arrangements
- Assistive technology/Specialised equipment
- Special Arrangements for State Examinations

A new Special Education Teaching allocation process was introduced in September 2017. The revised allocation process replaces the generalised allocation process at primary and post primary school level for learning support and high incidence special educational needs, and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) allocation process, which provided additional resource teaching supports to schools, to support pupils assessed as having Low Incidence disabilities, such as, moderate general learning disabilities, vision or hearing impairments, physical disabilities or autism,

The new Special Education Teaching allocation provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile.

Under the new allocation model, schools are provided with a total allocation for special education needs support based on their school profile.

The provision of a profiled allocation is intended to give a fairer allocation to each school. It recognises that all schools need an allocation for special needs support and provides a graduated allocation taking into account the actual level of need in each school.

From the point of view of parents the new Special Education Teaching allocation model means that their child will receive support based on the level of his/her special educational needs in school rather than on the basis of a diagnosis.

The Department of Education and Skills has committed to developing a similar model of resource allocation for the Special Needs Assistants Scheme<sup>7</sup>.

The Department of Education and Skills therefore has moved, and continues to move, towards allocating resources on the basis of need as opposed to diagnosis.

It should be noted that difficulties around transitioning into primary schools were highlighted in a recent Economic and Social Research Institute report<sup>8</sup>. At present, primary school teachers often receive little information about a child's skills and the challenges that they will face when they start primary school.

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Education and Skills, 30 May, 2018, Press release 'Minister Bruton welcomes Special Needs Assistants Scheme review' <https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2018-press-releases/PR18-05-30.html>

<sup>8</sup> Smyth, E., 2018, **The transition to primary education: insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study**, ESRI

### 3. Review of overage exemptions

#### Changes to overage exemptions and subsequent pause

In December 2017, a decision was taken to cease the system of overage exemptions. The rationale underpinning this decision, as articulated by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, was to support the achievement of better outcomes for children with disabilities based on the evidence that children with a disability should start school with their peers once they have access to high-quality and inclusive primary school education and that they should become teenagers with their peers and transition to secondary school with them.

This decision was taken in the context of, and in conjunction with, the introduction of a full two years of **ECCE** provision with effect from September 2018, and the introduction of **AIM** supports. In effect, the view taken at the time was that the expansion of the full second year of provision and the **AIM** supports in place actually exceeded the provision available through the granting of the overage exemption as introduced at the outset of the **ECCE** programme in 2010.

The decision was signalled a year in advance and was made by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs with the Department of Education and Skills. It was also done in close collaboration with members of the **AIM** cross-sectoral implementation group, including representatives from the National Council for Special Education, the National Disability Authority and the HSE, representatives of parents of children with special needs and a representative of early years providers.

There was broad agreement that, in light of the developments in free pre-school education and the supports in place for children in primary schools, the overage exemption would no longer support the policy aim that children should transition to primary school with their peers. However, the decision prompted stakeholders to raise concerns and the Minister therefore paused the proposed change to allow for a wider consultation, to include consultation with parents of children with disabilities and special needs.

Following the announcement of a consultation process on the proposed changes to the rules on overage exemptions in the **ECCE** programme a number of concerns were raised by some parents of children with disabilities. These parents are currently deciding whether to defer their child's entry into the free **ECCE** programme and still avail of two full years irrespective of any future policy changes. An exemption to the upper age limit in the **ECCE** programme will be maintained for this cohort for this period of time. This means that parents of

children , (especially children born from September to December), can defer their children's start date from September 2018, (when the child will be between 2 years 8 months and 2 years 11 months) to September 2019 (when the child will be between 3 years 8 months and 3 years 11 months) and continue to avail of two full years of the **ECCE** programme or seventy-six weeks in total.

## Consultation process

The consultation process, on the proposed changes to the rules on overage exemptions in the **ECCE** programme, was jointly led by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills, with the assistance of the National Disability Authority, who were asked to conduct an independent review. This involved a number of steps, including:

1. Review of the relevant literature and policy.
4. Review of existing data on overage exemptions, including trends in applications and approvals.
5. Profile of children currently in receipt of overage exemptions.
6. Review of existing data and trends in school starting age.
7. Identification of options for managing the exemptions going forward (including the criteria and application, appraisal and appeals processes) and to consider the impact of each option identified for:
  - Children and families
  - Pre-schools and primary schools (including practitioners and teachers)
  - Department of Children and Youth Affairs (and its respective Agencies, policies and programmes)
  - Department of Education and Skills (and its respective Agencies, policies and programmes)

Step 5 will be led by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills.

8. Development, testing and issuing of a series of questions for parents of children with disabilities and preparation of a report on the results
9. Identification of key stakeholders (including parents) for consultation
10. Facilitation of an Open Policy Debate with these stakeholders in conjunction with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills.

## **How the National Disability Authority approached the review process**

In conducting this independent review process over a 4 month period the National Disability Authority used a variety of methods in gathering evidence during the consultative process, including:

- Desktop research and literature review of schemes in selected English speaking jurisdictions
- Focus groups with key stakeholders
- Bilateral engagement with parents and a parents survey
- Open policy debate

### **Research**

The National Disability Authority searched for published peer reviewed literature for evidence of the educational/social/cognitive effects of a child being retained (held back) in early years/primary education.

The National Disability Authority also examined current provision in the following English speaking jurisdictions of England, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and the United States of America. There was also bilateral engagement with key informants in selected jurisdictions.

Through this engagement the National Disability Authority sought to find information on the following questions:

1. What is the legal framework around deferment? For example, what are the legal age requirements for a child's schooling?
2. How does the system for applying exemptions work? That is:
  - What is the infrastructure?
  - How the exemptions are managed?
  - What provisions are in place for children with disabilities?
  - How many exemptions sought by parents are specifically related to disability?

### **Data**

The National Disability Authority reviewed and analysed data provided by the Department of Education and Skills on Junior Infants Enrolments over a ten-year period from 2006-2016 in mainstream settings, which provided a breakdown of school starting age data. The Department also provided data on retention rates in mainstream settings for Junior Infants and for Primary Schools, as a whole, for nine years from 2006-2015.

The National Disability Authority also reviewed and analysed anonymised data provided by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on those currently availing of an overage exemption in the 2017-2018 programme year and data on those availing of **AIM** supports. This process involved the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Pobal linking the two different datasets and providing the National Disability Authority with a linked anonymised dataset on four hundred and eighty-five children who had received an overage exemption for the 2017 – 2018 **ECCE** programme year. The National Disability Authority did an in-depth review and analysis of a sample of forty-seven redacted overage exemption application files.

## Focus groups with key stakeholders

### Parents

The engagement with parents consisted of a number of strands, one of which was a survey of parents who had applied for an **ECCE** overage exemption. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs had email addresses for two-hundred and twenty-one of the approximately 500 parents who had applied for an **ECCE** overage exemption for the 2017 – 2018 programme year. One hundred and ten people commenced the survey and most questions were completed by approximately ninety respondents giving a response rate of just over 40%. In addition, twenty-one telephone interviews were conducted with parents who responded to this survey and who gave consent to be contacted and participate in a more in depth one to one consultation.

### Engagement with other stakeholders

Focus groups were held by the National Disability Authority with other key stakeholders, including

- Early childhood care and education sector, with representatives attending from Childcare Committees, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Early Childhood Ireland, mainstream and special pre-schools providers and Pobal
- Education sector, with representatives from **Better Start**, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Department of Education and Skills, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, National Council for Special Education (NCSE), National Educational and Psychological Services (NEPS), and Túsla (Child and Family Agency)
- Health sector, with representatives from the HSE – Progressing Disability Services

The key areas for discussion during the Focus Groups included:

- Brief update on the current overage exemption provision, policy options and related issues

- Perceptions on what might be the drivers for parents seeking exemptions
- Potential impacts on the journey of a child through early years and education
- Transitions
- Pre-school to Primary
- “School Readiness”
- Other considerations

## Open Policy Debate

The Open Policy Debate took place in the Mansion House Dublin. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, T.D. gave the opening address. Brief presentations were made by:

- the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on the **AIM** Programme and the supports provided for in the **ECCE** programme
- the Department of Education and Skills on how children with special educational needs are supported in the educational system and the resources provided for such support
- the National Disability presented on its role and work in the consultation process on the review of the overage exemption

The participants were drawn from a range of stakeholders including parents, service providers, education sector, HSE, early childhood practitioners, representative organisations from children’s and disability sector and officials from the Departments of Children and Youth Affairs and Education and Skills. The key input of the day was from the participants who attended and who engaged through small groups to address the following topics and related questions.

## Morning session

### Topic: What are the pros and cons of the system for ECCE overage exemptions?

- What were the pros and cons of the system when **ECCE** provision was 1 year?
- Have these changed now that the standard **ECCE** provision is 2 years, with **AIM** supports available?
- Are there consequences of having a wide age range in an early years setting?

- Are the criteria for applying correct and is this system working?
- What are the downstream effects, if any, of exemptions (that is, when the children progress through the education system, primary and secondary)?
- Are transition mechanisms adequate?

### **Afternoon session**

**Topic: Having regard to the need for age rules in the ECCE scheme and the legal requirement to be in school by age 6, and taking the two programme years of ECCE provision as a given, what is the optimum structure of ECCE to address the range of issues identified in the morning session?**

- How beneficial is it for children to progress through the education system with their peers or are there any downsides?
- What, if any, changes are required to the transition process to facilitate supporting parents in their choices?
- How do we best deal with children whose additional needs arise after starting in **Early Childhood Care and Education**?
- What messaging needs to take place with parents, early years practitioners and other stakeholders in order to increase awareness of all scheme details?

There was a brief panel discussion at the conclusion of the day reflecting on the key issues that arose during the day.

## 4. Data analysis of current exemptions

Three of the tasks that the National Disability Authority were requested to undertake related to examining existing data. Specifically, the National Disability Authority was asked to:

- Review the existing data on overage exemptions, including trends in applications and approvals
- Profile children currently in receipt of overage exemptions
- Review existing data and trends in school starting age

The National Disability Authority reviewed and analysed anonymised data on exemptions granted provided by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs relating to 2012 to 2017.

The National Disability Authority also reviewed and analysed anonymised data on those currently availing of an overage exemption in 2017-2018 and data on those availing of **AIM** supports. This process involved the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Pobal linking the two datasets and providing the National Disability Authority with a linked anonymised dataset on 485 children who had received an overage exemption for the 2017 – 2018 **ECCE** programme year.

The National Disability Authority also did an in-depth review and analysis of a sample of forty-seven redacted overage exemption application files.

The National Disability Authority was provided with data from the Department of Education and Skills on Junior Infants Enrolments over a ten-year period from 2006-2016 in mainstream settings, which provided a breakdown of school starting age data. The Department also provided data on retention rates in mainstream settings for Junior Infants and for Primary Schools, as a whole, for a period of nine-years from 2006 to 2015.

## Department of Children and Youth Affairs administrative data

Table 1 – Trends in overage exemptions 2013 - 2017

Year	2 years pro-rata	Year	overage exemption	Year	Other Exemptions total
2012 – 2013	3	2013	1	2014	42
2013 – 2014	142	2014	167	2015	13
2014 – 2015	159	2015	109	2016	26
2015 – 2016	258	2016	215	2017	29
2016 – 2017	1	2017	487	2018	1*
		2018*	11		
		2019*	1		
<b>2 years pro-rata total</b>	<b>563</b>	<b>overage exemption total</b>	<b>991</b>	<b>Other Exemptions total</b>	<b>111</b>

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Administrative Data. n. 1665

\* Doesn't represent data for a full year

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs provided the National Disability Authority with anonymised administrative data on applications for a variety of types of exemptions approved since 2013. Of the two thousand one hundred and eighty-two exemptions, one thousand six hundred and sixty-five involved the child being overage. Of the one thousand six hundred and sixty-five, one hundred and eleven are recorded under a variety of headings such as 'transfers', 'deferrals' and 'second years' etc., summarised under the "Other Exemptions" heading in Table 1 above. As can be seen from Table 1 above, of the remaining one thousand five hundred and fifty-three a total of nine hundred and ninety-one were recorded as 'overage exemptions' and five hundred and sixty-three were recorded as '2 years pro-rata'. '2 years pro-rata' involves two years of part-time **ECCE** (included in the figures in Table 1 are only those children who would be over the upper age limit for the **ECCE** programme as a result of availing of the '2 years pro-rata'). While 'overage exemption' refers to children applying to participate in a year of **ECCE** in which they will be over the upper age limit for the **ECCE** programme (these children may or may not have participated in **ECCE** the previous year).

No clear pattern emerges from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs **ECCE** overage exemptions Administrative Data. However, in looking at the years for which full data was available (2013 to 2017) there is a very significant drop in "2 years pro-rata" from the 2015 – 2016 to the 2016 – 2017 programme year. This occurs in a period when "overage exemptions" numbers increase

significantly. While it is not possible to say with any certainty why the “2 years pro-rata” or part-time option numbers plummeted in 2016 – 2017 it may be worth noting that two major changes that took place in that **ECCE** programme year were the introduction of **AIM** and introduction of multiple **ECCE** in takes. This would appear to support the Department of Children and Youth Affairs’ view that the very significant reforms to the **ECCE** programme warranted a re-consideration of **ECCE** overage exemptions.

To get a clearer understanding of who the children who had an **ECCE** overage exemption were, the National Disability Authority requested that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs provide information on those currently availing of an overage exemption in 2017-2018 and data on those availing of **AIM** supports in 2017-2018. The Department, with the assistance of Pobal, provided the National Disability Authority with anonymised data on 485 children with an **ECCE** overage exemption who were recorded in the Pobal data as taking up an **ECCE** place (or Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) place<sup>9</sup>).

**Table 2 – Gender by disability category**

	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Speech and Language	165	60	225
Developmental Delay	66	27	93
Down Syndrome	23	22	45
ASD	36	9	46**
Unspecified	21	12	33
Intellectual Disability	3	2	5
Cerebral Palsy (including Cerebral Palsy + Epilepsy)	5	0	5
Other	18	15	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>485</b>

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Pobal Administrative Data. n. 485

\* 5 was taken as the as the cut off for “Disability Category” (that is. other disability types / medical conditions with less than 5 children are included in “other”).

\*\* Gender data missing for one individual, therefore row sub totals do not equal total figure

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<sup>9</sup> Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) The Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) Programme provides support for certain parents to avail of reduced cost childcare costs at participating privately owned childcare services and also at community not-for-profit childcare services. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs pays a portion of the childcare costs for eligible children, with the parent paying the remainder.

Table 2 above shows the gender and disability category of those with an **ECCE** overage exemption in the 2017 – 2018 programme year. As can be seen, there are more than twice as many boys than girls with **ECCE** overage exemptions. Two hundred and twenty-five or 46% of those with **ECCE** overage exemptions were recorded as having a ‘Speech and Language’ difficulty.

**Table 3 – Days per week**

<b>Days per week</b>	
1 Day	3
2 Days	11
3 Days	26
4 Days	20
5 Days	412
<b>Total</b>	<b>472*</b>

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Pobal Administrative Data. n. 472

\*Data on days attending was only available for 472 of the 485 of the overall dataset

Table 3 shows the numbers of days per week those with an **ECCE** overage exemption attended **Early Childhood Care and Education**. This is significant as facilitating part-time participation in ECCE had been part of the original rationale for the **ECCE** overage exemption. As can be seen in Table 3, four hundred and twelve or 87% of those with an **ECCE** overage exemption in 2017 – 2018 attended 5 days a week.

**Table 4 – AIM Supports by disability category**

<b>Disability Type*</b>	<b>No AIM</b>	<b>Any AIM</b>	<b>Of which AIM Level 7</b>
Speech and Language	167	58	44
Developmental Delay	50	43	34
Down Syndrome	25	20	18
ASD	22	24	19
Unspecified	17	16	14
Intellectual Disability	3	2	2
Cerebral Palsy (including Cerebral Palsy + Epilepsy)	0	5	4
Other	20	13	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>304</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>146</b>

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Pobal Administrative Data. n. 485

\* 5 was taken as the as the cut off for “Disability Type” (that is, other disability types / medical conditions with less than 5 children are included in “other”)

Table 4 shows a significant and surprising finding. 304 or 63% of those with an **ECCE** overage exemption had no targeted **AIM** support. Table 5 shows that 264 or 56% of children with an **ECCE** overage exemption had no targeted **AIM** Support and attended **ECCE** 5 days a week. As can be seen below in Table 5 those with no targeted **AIM** supports attending 5 days a week constituted up to 70% of children in some disability categories. This low level of overlap between **AIM** and **ECCE** overage exemption and the fact that the vast majority of children were attending 5 days a week suggested that it would be important for this review to get a better understanding of the children who have an **ECCE** overage exemption.

**Table 5 – Children with an ECCE overage exemption without targeted AIM supports, attending 5 days per week by disability type**

<b>Disability Category*</b>	<b>Nos. of children</b>	<b>Nos. with no AIM supports attending 5 days per week</b>	<b>Children with no AIM supports attending 5 days per week as % all children by disability type</b>
Speech and Language	220	154	70%
Developmental Delay	91	42	46%
Down Syndrome	42	18	43%
ASD	45	17	38%
Unspecified	31	13	42%
Intellectual Disability	5	3	60%
Cerebral Palsy (including Cerebral Palsy + Epilepsy)	5	0	0%
Other	33	17	51%
<b>Total</b>	<b>472</b>	<b>264</b>	<b>56%</b>

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Pobal Administrative Data. n. 472

\* 5 was taken as the as the cut off for “Disability Type” (that is, other disability types / medical conditions with less than 5 children are included in “other”).

### **Review of sample of ECCE overage exemption application files**

In addition to reviewing the administrative data made available by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs the National Disability Authority requested a sample of redacted **ECCE** overage exemption application files. Forty-seven files were received, forty-five of which were relevant (one was missing most detail and one was not relevant as it related a split place between

two settings rather than an **ECCE** overage exemption). Each of the 45 files were read in full and relevant details recorded in a systematic way. What is of particular interest from the files was how the case for an **ECCE** overage exemption was presented. The forty-five files reviewed were approved applications.

**Table 6 – Features of professionals’ letters of support**

<b>No</b> reference to the fact that the child attends pre-school	7
<b>No</b> reference to child being observed in pre-school or reference to pre-school teacher’s observations of child	33
Letter(s) from professionals <b>do not</b> specifically recommend an overage exemption or additional year of pre-school	12
<b>No opinion / evidence</b> put forward on challenges that the child may face in the primary school environment	37

Source: NDA analysis of Department of Children and Youth Affairs files. n. 45

As is clear from Table 6, the letters from professionals which must accompany an application for an **ECCE** overage exemption typically do not set out evidence or professional opinion on why a child’s development would be hindered by progressing to primary school or the challenges that the child would face in the primary school context nor are they typically based on observing the child in the pre-school context (or even based on the observations of those who do observe the child).

Typically, the applications consist of a cover letter from a parent or pre-school manager stating that the child needs an additional year of pre-school with letter(s) from professional(s) attached. The letter from professionals typically state that the child is accessing their service and provide varying degrees of detail on the child’s disability, delay or health issue. Most but not all contain a recommendation that the child should remain in pre-school. However, many of these recommendations simply state that the professional supports the parent’s view that the child would benefit from staying in pre-school.

Some applications provide great detail on the child’s disability, delay or health issue, others don’t mention a disability, delay or health issue but merely confirm that the child is accessing a particular therapy or discipline. Some of the files which do mention a child’s disability, delay or health are very specific and provide lots of detail, while others contain nothing more specific than, for example, “speech issue”, “speech delay” or “concerns about development”.

Any administrative system for deciding on whether or not a child should be granted an **ECCE** overage exemption will face the challenge of balancing being rigorous and not being onerous on parents or professionals. The current system

correctly or incorrectly appears to set a relatively low threshold in terms of supporting evidence. Moreover, the evidence which is provided is very much focused on the child’s disability, delay or health issue rather than on considerations of their current capacity to engage in play and learning in a pre-school context and any likely challenges that the child would face in participating and learning in the primary school context.

### Department of Education and Skills administrative data

One question that arose in early discussions on **ECCE** overage exemptions was whether there was evidence that **ECCE** overage exemptions were contributing to more children going to school at an older age. No data was available to answer this question. However, the Department of Education and Skills has data on children’s school starting age in mainstream schools. The data records children’s age by year not by month and the children’s age in January not September is recorded. However, knowing how many children are 6 and 7 in the January after enrolling in Junior Infants allows a calculation of how many children were 5 years and 8 months or more in the September in which they enrolled in Junior Infants.

Table 7 below shows that the introduction of **ECCE** (and **ECCE** overage exemptions) in 2010 does not appear to have resulted in greater numbers of older children enrolling in Junior Infants in (mainstream) schools.

**Table 7 - Children enrolling in Mainstream Junior Infants**

Year	State funded Pre-school	All children starting mainstream school	Children more than 5 years 8 months starting mainstream school	% of Children more than 5 years 8 months starting school
2006	No <b>ECCE</b>	61411	987	1.6
2007	No <b>ECCE</b>	63252	953	1.5
2008	No <b>ECCE</b>	65360	1013	1.5
2009	No <b>ECCE</b>	64874	953	1.5
2010	<b>ECCE</b> one year, one in-take	63784	821	1.3*
2011	<b>ECCE</b> one year, one in-take	68745	851	1.2
2012	<b>ECCE</b> one year, one in-take	71435	858	1.2

Year	State funded Pre-school	All children starting mainstream school	Children more than 5 years 8 months starting mainstream school	% of Children more than 5 years 8 months starting school
2013	ECCE one year, one in-take	72392	856	1.2
2014	ECCE one year, one in-take	71662	855	1.2
2015	ECCE one year, one in-take	71564	848	1.2
2016	ECCE, Multiple in-takes	68435	926	1.3

Source: Department of Education and Skills

\*ECCE was introduced in January 2010 so those going to primary school in September 2010 would only have been able to avail of ECCE from January to June

The Department of Education and Skills provided data on retention (children 'staying back and repeating a year of school') in Primary Schools and in Junior Infants specifically. This data relates to mainstream schools. Table 9 shows that retention in primary as a whole almost halved between 2006 and 2015. Table 8 shows that retention in Junior Infants has declined rapidly since 2009. However, despite the decline in the numbers of children retained in primary school some children are still retained.

**Table 8 – Junior Infants Retained Pupils**

Year	Boys	Girls	All
2006	152	121	273
2007	202	138	340
2008	160	123	283
2009	274	192	466
2010	211	190	401
2011	154	115	269
2012	189	118	307
2013	151	116	267
2014	138	134	272
2015	126	92	218

Source: Department of Education and Skills

**Table 9 – Primary School Retained Pupils**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>All</b>
2006	1,184	939	2,123
2007	1,191	936	2,127
2008	1,136	890	2,026
2009	1,255	1,005	2,260
2010	1,093	910	2,003
2011	1,266	760	2,026
2012	970	756	1,726
2013	777	654	1,431
2014	810	686	1,496
2015	614	506	1,120

Source: Department of Education and Skills

It is important to note that the Department of Education and Skills has clearly outlined its policy on retention. In Circulars 11/01 and 23/03 the Department has stated that in the context of considerable resources being provided for learning support the Department's policy is that children should progress with their class peers except in exceptional circumstances. There has to be an educational basis for any retention decision. A school principal's decision to retain a child must be taken in consultation with parents, class teacher, learning support / resource teachers. Schools are also required to develop a programme which records what approaches will be used to support the child (in the repeated year) and what the expected benefits are. A school principal must record the decision and bring it to the attention of the Inspector when they next visit the school.

The Department of Education and Skills has articulated a clear policy and rationale on retention, established a process, which is based on the child's educational best interests and outcomes and ensured that there is some oversight of decisions on retention.

## 5. International evidence

### Evidence from peer reviewed literature

The full literature review is available in **Appendix 3**.

### Evidence on ‘redshirting’<sup>10</sup> or delayed school entry

There are two schools of thought with respect to delaying school entry, or ‘redshirting’:

- The “gift of time” – delaying school start to allow the child to mature and confer a subsequent advantage – **maturational view**
- School can provide a nurturing, scaffolded learning experience which fosters the child’s learning and development, thus delaying entry to this environment is counterintuitive – **interactionist view**

The evidence for the efficacy of either approach is mixed, with the research showing positive, null and negative effects in terms of academic and socio-emotional development.

A factor in this may be the motivation of parents for delaying school entry. Where the parent delays school entry in order for the child to be older and gain advantage, it is known as positive selection. Where the parent delays school entry on the basis of a developmental concern, it is known as negative selection. Some of the available literature did not consider the impact that other factors may have, for instance, child factors (temperament and behaviour), socio/environmental factors (poverty, ethnicity), to parental factors (mother’s level of education).

This mix of evidence is illustrated by the studies focussing on the effects of delayed school entry for children with disabilities:

### **Fortner and Jenkins (2018) - Is delayed school entry harmful for children with disabilities?**

There is substantial variation in the association between ‘redshirting’ (delayed school entry) and achievement outcomes across categories of students with disabilities.

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Redshirting’ is an American term (which originated in a sports context) which refers to the practice of delaying age-eligible children entering school in order to allow extra time for socioemotional, intellectual, or physical growth.

Delayed entry is associated with lower achievement for students with cognitive disabilities, learning disabilities, and those with other health impairments, but higher achievement for students with speech/language disorders.

The results suggest that for the vast majority of students with disabilities, delayed kindergarten entry provides no benefits for students' academic achievement in mathematics or reading.

**Fortner and Jenkins (2017) - Kindergarten Redshirting: Motivations and spill-overs using census-level data.**

The odds of redshirted students being identified as disabled by the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade were 1.75 times higher than normal entry students, supporting the view that parents are delaying their child's school entry based on developmental concerns.

The cohort of children who had been designated as having an identified disability by the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade were identified. Comparing the children among this group who had and had not been redshirted, redshirted children performed nearly one-third of a standard deviation lower on the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade standardised maths test and no different to normal entry students on the standardised 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading test.

Fortner and Jenkins reported a detrimental effect of delayed school entry and called on educators to encourage parents who have concerns about their child's development to enrol them in school as soon as they are eligible to attend. They further note that public schools have access to better intervention services and supports which allow for earlier identification of children's needs, and well-structured interventions and instruction.

**Datar (2006) - Does delaying school entry give children a head start?**

Children with disabilities entering kindergarten at age 5 scored significantly lower on math and reading compared to children without a disability at the same age.

Delaying entrance into kindergarten by 1 year raises children with disabilities' scores at kindergarten entry beyond that of a 5-year-old entrant with no disability.

“These results suggest that an extra year out of school compensates to a large extent for the disadvantage presented by disabilities” (2006, p. 56).

The Datar study examined groups of children using the **Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten (ECLS-K)** to determine whether kindergarten entrance age has an effect on children's academic achievement in elementary school. However, the Datar study did not consider the possible effects of children's participation in quality early learning environments prior to starting school (including those in the delayed year out of school). Datar noted

that in the USA, “children from low socioeconomic status (SES) families are known to have significantly lower participation rates in public or private early childhood programs compared to children from high SES families” (2006, p. 56).

### **Observations on available evidence on delayed school entry**

Though elements of both maturational and interactionist rationales appear in the Irish context for overage exemptions, the evidence base does not make comparison easy – the Irish debate concerns delaying entry to primary school where the child would typically remain in the early learning, pre-school context. Thus the child is deferred in order to mature as well as being exposed to a formal early learning environment. Much of the available (US) literature is based on studies which concern children who are deferred and remain at home or outside of a learning environment.

### **Evidence on Retention**

Much of the research on overage, or ‘old for grade’, children centres on the practice of grade retention in the US context. This is the practice of holding a child back at the same level until they are deemed ready to move on. This might more closely approximate holding the child at pre-school level until they are ‘ready’ to move into Junior Infants.

**The evidence for grade retention is extensive and unequivocal** – the practice is not effective and may even be detrimental to the child. Much of the research has also concentrated on retention at the early grades (particularly kindergarten) as there was a belief that early retention is less stigmatising and mitigates future failures. The literature has highlighted the effects of retention on a number of areas:

A meta-analysis of retention research (Xia and Kirby, 2009) covered 11 empirical studies on the **academic effects** of retention in the early years (Kindergarten or Grade 1). Researchers found that being held back at this stage failed to improve academic performance and often had negative effects on student achievement down the line.

Holmes’ meta-analysis (1989) examined the **socio-emotional effects** of retention, like personal adjustment, self-concept, attitudes and attendance. He did not find that attitudes towards school differed between retained and non-retained students. Regarding personal adjustment, his findings were inconclusive as the result of ‘no negative effect’ was influenced by large magnitudes of positive effects from only three studies. Holmes concluded that the evidence for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes.

Some research specifically examined the **effects of being ‘old for grade’**:

Roderick (1994) estimated the age-related effects of school drop-out risks, finding that 36.49% of students had been retained for one or more years (mainly in the 1st or 7th grade) and of these students, the drop-out rate between the ages of 16 and 19 was 79.84%. This drop-out rate compared to 27.39% of promoted students.

Byrd et al. (1996) studied drug usage among children who were old for their grade. The researchers found that these older students were more likely to report a range of substance-use and risky behaviours, such as using alcohol, tobacco, cocaine, and driving in a car with someone who had been drinking.

Jimerson and Renshaw describe adolescents who had been retained as more independent, less likely to have close parental supervision over their homework and social experiences, more easily in a position to skip school, and more likely to have greater access to negative influences in the community and online (p.13).

Byrnes (1989) reported on **children's voices**. Children retained in kindergarten felt that being held back was overwhelmingly negative – 84% of the responses centred on being “sad”, “bad” or “upset”, with others naming embarrassment. When the non-promoted children were asked what the worst thing about not progressing was they named being laughed at and teased (22%), and not being with friends (16%) among other issues.

There was an emphasis in many studies that retaining or promoting at-risk students are not sufficient interventions in and of themselves – they should be accompanied with tailored supports and targets.

Though the literature can highlight interesting avenues and findings on ‘redshirting’ and retention, the evidence should be treated with caution due to the differences in the US and Irish context. As such, further research is needed on the effects of delayed school entry for Irish children with disabilities.

### **Arrangements for pre-school retention in other jurisdictions**

In addition to reviewing the published peer reviewed literature on retention and ‘redshirting’, the National Disability Authority collected information on processes for managing delayed school entry and pre-school retention in other jurisdictions. This involved gathering information from Government websites and other grey literature as well as speaking to key informants. England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, New Zealand and the United States were chosen as the jurisdictions to review as the National Disability Authority had previously reviewed pre-school supports for children with disabilities in these jurisdictions.

The full review of the jurisdictions is available in **Appendix 2**. The following is a summary of observations on processes for managing delayed school entry and pre-school retention.

Children are often differentiated by whether they have a diagnosed disability or not. For children that have a diagnosed disability, many jurisdictions provide a formal plan for their education (including early years education) which outlines their support needs, educational goals, school placements etc. For the children that do not have a diagnosis and plan, decisions appear to take place on an ad hoc, localised basis.

For parents that defer children without a diagnosis (and one of these educational plans), funding for additional years of pre-school cannot be presumed. The jurisdictions where it was clear that funding for an extra year of pre-school because of a deferred entry was a given were Scotland (for a defined and narrow cohort of children whose birth month would make them comparatively young for their class) and New Zealand.

The USA has quantifiable measures for Kindergarten readiness and 33 states screen pre-school children for Kindergarten readiness. In other jurisdictions, decisions on readiness (and possible deferral) are based on a collaborative effort (parents and school officials, professionals involved in supporting the child) and are based on the best interests of the child.

Some jurisdictions place their focus on what happens **before** pre-school rather than the transition between pre-school and primary school – for instance, additional early years care funding for at-risk two year olds in England, and the option to enrol children in transitional Kindergarten in California which adopts a two-year approach to Kindergarten.

Guidance to parents in every jurisdiction reviewed emphasises the role that good forward planning plays in successful transition. Parents are encouraged to meet with the new school ahead of time, discuss the child's needs etc.

Deferred school entry, in many jurisdictions, must be accompanied by clear, proactive educational goals for the retained year that are outlined in respect of the individual student. For example, developmental or educational goals which are worked towards over the additional year.

Key informants in the jurisdictions with whom the National Disability Authority engaged emphasised that:

- in their jurisdiction there is broad agreement that it is in the best interests of children to move on to school with their peers, except in very exceptional circumstances
- there is unlikely to be any perfect system for determining which children meet those very exceptional circumstances criteria
- key to getting the approach right is supporting children and parents in the transition to school and in particular having people (key workers or other professionals) who can reassure parents that schools can adequately support their child's development

## 6. Engagement with stakeholders - parents

### Background

Engagement with parents consisted of a number of strands, one of which was a survey of parents who had applied for an **ECCE** overage exemption. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs had email addresses for 221 of the approximately five hundred parents who had applied for an **ECCE** overage exemption for the 2017 – 2018 programme year. (Service providers are the larger source of applications) one hundred and ten people commenced the survey and most questions were completed by approximately ninety respondents giving a response rate of just over 40%.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs sought permission from survey respondents to share the survey responses with the National Disability Authority. The data received by the National Disability Authority had to be cleaned up in a number of instances. For example, some respondents selected no disability type but then stated “speech and language” in under “other”. In cleaning up the data this response was categorised as “Communication difficulty”.

The nature of the available sample limits the inferences, which can be made about the overall population of all children who have availed of an **ECCE** overage exemption. However, given how little information was available, the survey provides some basis for gaining a better understanding of a sample of children for whom an application for an **ECCE** overage exemption was made, focusing on basic information about the children and on their parents’ concerns.

### Children who have an Early Childhood Care and Education overage exemption

Parents were asked to indicate what age their child would be in September 2018. The average age (in September 2018) of the children in the survey sample was 5 years 10 months. As is clear from Table 10 the majority of children in the sample availing of the **ECCE** overage exemption were still going to be 6 years or less in September 2018. These children are above the **ECCE** upper age limit of 5 years 6 months (when finishing the **ECCE** year in June) but will be 6 years or less at the start of the school year.

In the survey sample, ninety-three parents stated their child’s gender. Sixty-nine or 74% were boys and twenty-four or 26% were girls.

**Table 10 – Age**

6 years or less	70
Over 6 years	13

Source: Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 83

Table 11 shows the disability types identified by parents. As children could have a number of disabilities, parents were able to select more than one answer. Of the twenty-three who selected “other” category and provided details the most common responses were premature (six responses), genetic disorders (four responses) and Global Development Delay (two responses).

**Table 11 – Disability Type**

<b>Disability Type</b>	
Communication difficulty	52
Intellectual disability	26
Autism/ASD/Possible ASD	18
Sensory disability	16
Physical disability	13
Behavioural issues	13
Other	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>93*</b>

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 93

\*The 93 respondents could provide more than one answer as many children had more than one disability

**Table 12 – Disability type**

	<b>All</b>	<b>One disability only</b>	<b>% with one disability only</b>
Communication difficulty	52	23	44
Intellectual disability	26	8	31
Autism/ASD/ Possible ASD	18	9	50
Sensory disability	16	2	12
Physical disability	13	0	0
Behavioural issues	13	1	8
Other	23	13	57

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 93

Tables 12 and 13 provide further detail on the disability type of children for whom application for **ECCE** overage exemption as indicated by their parents. Many children have more than one disability.

The administrative data recorded two thirds of children for whom application for **ECCE** overage exemption were made as “speech and language”. It was unclear whether this reflected the fact that two thirds of the applicants had “speech and language” issues only or because two thirds of applicants emphasised “speech and language” in their application and forwarded professional reports relating to “speech and language”. Of the fifty-two survey respondents who indicated that the child had a “communication difficulty” twenty-three or 44% indicated that this was their child’s only disability. Table 13 provides details of the other disabilities, which those with a “communication difficulty” have.

Survey responses show a more varied pattern of disabilities among the sample of children than the administrative data suggested. However, it also shows that twenty-three of the overall ninety-three (or 25%) respondents indicated “communication difficulty” was their child’s only disability / difficulty. This suggests, perhaps, that consideration in relation to support provision and ideal setting for those with a communication difficulty should be one factor in considering **ECCE** overage exemptions and the broader considerations around how language development is supported in pre-school and primary school.

**Table 13 – Disability type**

	Communication difficulty	Intellectual disability	Autism/ ASD/ Possible ASD	Sensory disability	Physical disability	Behavioural issues	Other	Total
Communication difficulty		15	5	12	10	9	7	52
Intellectual disability	15		1	8	9	3	3	26
Autism/ASD/ Possible ASD	5	1		4	1	6	2	18
Sensory disability	12	8	4		4	6	3	16
Physical disability	10	9	1	4		4	2	13
Behavioural issues	9	3	6	6	4		1	13
Other	7	3	2	3	2	1		23

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of ECCE overage exemption parents. n 93

**Table 14 – When parents applied for an Early Childhood Care and Education overage exemption**

	Before starting ECCE Pre-school	In first year of ECCE Pre-school*	In second year of ECCE Pre-school*	Don't know/ can't remember
Intellectual disability	3	15	7	1
Communication difficulty	2	29	18	3
Physical disability	0	9	4	0
Sensory disability	1	9	5	1
Autism/ASD/ Possible ASD	2	5	10	1
Behavioural issues	0	6	6	1
Other	1	14	5	3
<b>Total **</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>8</b>

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 93

\* In the programme years 2016 – 2017 and 2017 - 2017 there were 3 entry points for **ECCE** Programme; January April and September. The overall point here is that 79 of the 93 children in the survey sample (or of the 85 whose parents could remember) the **ECCE** Overage Application was made after they started in the **ECCE Programme**

\*\* The 93 respondents could provide more than one answer as many children had more than one disability

**Table 15– Current Pattern of Attendance**

Attendance Pattern	
Full attendance	86
Part-attendance	7
Total	93

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 93

The origins of the **ECCE** overage exemption as outlined in Chapter 2 was that it was introduced to facilitate parents of a child with a disability who wished to start their child later in **ECCE** or who wished to split their child's **ECCE** "year" over two years (by attending part-time for two years). To do this, parents presumably would typically have needed to apply in advance of their child starting in **Early Childhood Care and Education**. For this reason, survey respondents were asked about when they applied for an **ECCE** overage exemption and about their

child's current pattern of attendance. Details of when parents applied for an **ECCE** overage exemption were also of interest because it would perhaps provide some indication of whether parents in the sample applied for an **Early Childhood Care and Education** overage exemption prior to their child experiencing **ECCE** (suggesting a planned delayed entry to school) or during **ECCE** programme (suggesting that delayed school entry was not what the parents had planned when they commenced the **ECCE** programme).

As Table 15 shows, children in the sample who have availed of an **ECCE** overage exemption were in the main (92%) attending **ECCE** full-time. Table 14 shows that seventy-nine (or 90% of those who could remember) parents of children in the sample applied for an **ECCE** overage exemption while their child was in the **ECCE** programme.

This suggests that for the vast majority of parents in the survey sample the **ECCE** overage exemption and late school entry was probably not part of their plan when their child entered the **ECCE** programme.

It also suggests that the parameters of the **ECCE** overage exemption and the need it is perhaps addressing are perhaps quite different from what was intended when it was introduced.

**Table 16 – Source of Initial Information on ECCE overage exemption**

Source of initial information	
From another parent (including from another parent on an online forum)	9 (6)*
From a friend, family member, colleague	4 (2)
From a pre-school staff member	58 (44)
From a disability professional	18 (8)
From a health professional	6 (2)
From an education professional	7 (1)
On an online forum	3 (1)
Other	9 (6)

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 88

\* Respondents could provide more than one source. The figure in brackets is where respondents indicated only one source.

**Table 17 – Source of Advice on Advantages and Disadvantages of Early Childhood Care and Education overage exemption**

Professionals	
From a pre-school staff member	72 (1)*
From a disability professional	77 (9)
From a health professional	24 (0)
From an education professional	43 (0)
Other	6 (0)

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 87

\* Respondents could provide more than one source. The figure in brackets is where respondents indicated only one source.

Tables 16 and 17 provide details of where parents in the survey sample got their information and advice. In Table 16, the number in brackets represents the number of parents who cited only that one source of initial information. It is clear (as Table 16 shows) that pre-school staff were central to providing initial information on the **ECCE** overage exemption. Given that parents need supporting evidence from disability or health professionals it is not surprising that (as Table 17 shows) parents, in the sample, received advice from these professionals. However, given that the decision not to progress to school would seem to involve not only considerations of the child but also the school’s capacity to meet that child’s needs it is significant that only half of parents discussed the advantages and disadvantages of their child remaining in pre-school rather than starting school with an education professional.

Eighty of the respondents provided details on the advice that they were given by the various professionals on the advantages of their child applying for an overage Exemption. Of the eighty responses, only seven make reference to specific difference between pre-school context compared to the school context. The larger pupil to teacher ratio in schools was cited by most of these seven respondents. Two respondents said that the advice was that their child would do better in a “non-academic”, less “pressurised” environment.

However, the vast majority of the advice from professionals, as reported by parents in the survey sample, related to children not having the skills for school or not being school ready. For example;

“Extra year would help him with social skills and improve his communication skills. He would have been lost in mainstream school if he started in September 2017”

“It was felt that [Child’s name] speech and overall maturity would be better served by the extra year”

“They said he would be much stronger socially by doing the extra year and hopefully have a better handle on how to control his emotions and also be less scared of other children”

“All the above [professionals] were in agreement that going forward would have been too much and she would have not be capable”

“[I] was advised my son was not able for school and that an extra year in pre-school would be of great benefit to him”

“One more year in preschool would allow him to: 1) Improve social skills that were somewhat behind 2) improve his behaviour in terms of following rules 3) Improve his language/communications skills what were also behind”

“I was advised that the extra year would greatly benefit my son. Following observation the psychologist said he would develop more skills needed for starting school. He has a significant speech and language delay and this has improved throughout the year although he still has a long way to go”

“I was told he needed to be in preschool for an extra year as he was very delayed for his age and wasn’t ready for primary school”

Sixty-four of the respondents provided detail on the advice given by professionals on any possible disadvantages of applying for an overage exemption and keeping the child in **ECCE** pre-school programme for an additional year. Of the sixty-four respondents, thirty-seven (or 59%) said that they were advised that there **were no possible disadvantages**. Ten respondents cited that the advice from professionals related to the fact that their child would be older than their class peers. For example,

“It was noted that he would be amongst the oldest in his class group, but the benefits outweighed this significantly (they advised). Age is a crude yardstick for premature children”

“It was highlighted he would be much older than his school peers, however, he is small of stature and as such it is not a standout issue”

“The only disadvantage was that he may be a year older than some children in junior Infants next year, however, we have not observed any obvious indicators of this in pre-school this year”

“Some concerns regarding age on entry but all agreed this was worth it”

Very little of the professionals’ advice, as reported by parents in the survey sample, on disadvantages of delaying school entry provided much detail on what the possible disadvantage might be. Some exceptions to this were -

“Ability to fit in with a different group of peers who will be a lot younger. Dealing with feeling of "staying behind" when rest of pre school group make the big move to primary school”

“Age when leaving primary school and possibly having expectations too high on what would improve with the additional year”

“Oldest in the class or possibility of being bored. Neither of which we think will be relevant. Many children with no delays are almost 6 going to school. Physically he is tiny so will never appear older. And the Playschool have reassured us they will continue to challenge him”

“We'd have a child at home for an extra year and despite the "free" preschool year, that costs a fortune and causes great inconvenience having to drop our older daughter in one place in the mornings and Sophia at another”

“She could lose interest as those around her are so young. Lose confidence in her ability to perform and think she's not growing up. Begin to develop a negative impression of attending school. Feeling overwhelmed”

“Bored, may get attached to children”

A number of the other responses did not in fact identify any possible disadvantages in applying for an overage exemption and keeping the child in the **ECCE** pre-school programme for an additional year but, rather, re-stated the advantages.

Overall, in relation to information and advice it appears that pre-school staff are very central to providing initial information. Pre-school staff and disability and health professionals appear to be central to giving advice to parents. This advice appears to relate to the child’s lack of school readiness skills. Only half of the parents in the survey sample received advice from educational professionals.. Advice, on how a child could be supported and accommodated in the school environment, appears to be fairly uncommon, as does the advice from professionals about any possible disadvantages to children progressing to school with their peers.

## Parents' concerns

The survey asked parents about the concerns they had which resulted in them applying for an **ECCE** overage exemption. As Table 18 shows, the major concern of parents is their child's "readiness" rather than with schools' capacity to meet their child's needs. Sixty-three or 71% of parents in the survey sample indicated that their concern about their child's readiness was their only concern in applying for an **ECCE** overage exemption.

**Table 18 – Main Areas of Parents' Concern**

Main concern	All with this concern	Those with only this concern
I had concerns about my child's readiness for primary school	86	63
I had concerns about the ability of the available primary school(s) to meet my child's needs	20	0
Other	7	0

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 89

**Table 19– Parent's views of areas where their child would have difficulty in school**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Academically	71	10	2	4	1	88
Socially	69	11	6	2	0	88
Behaviourally	52	13	13	9	1	88

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 88

Parents were asked to indicate the extent to which they had concerns in relation to their child's potential academic, social and behaviour difficulties had the child progressed to school in September 2017. Table 19 sets out the parents' responses. Most parents in the survey sample had concerns in relation to all three areas they were asked about.

Fifty-one of the parents answered a further open ended question to provide further detail of their concerns about the ability of the primary school to meet their child's needs but many of these responses in fact were restatements of their child's disability, medical condition or delay.

Some parents said they had not considered the school's ability to support their child.

"I hadn't given any thought to the school's ability, I was just concerned with my daughter's readiness"

"Cannot speak for the school, I just felt that the extra year would greatly improve his readiness for school as developmentally he's about a year to eighteen months behind his peers"

"No issues with the school, it was knowing my child was not ready for primary school environment"

The most frequently mentioned issue was class size / pupil to teacher ratio, which was mentioned by nine of the parents.

"Was worried as he is a traumatised hyper vigilant little boy. Very quiet easily overlooked in crowd of peers"

"More kids are in same room than in preschool. Lost in communication"

"Larger class - child has bad attention span and very easily distracted needs routine breaks wouldn't be given a curriculum to suit his pace"

"My child would have been left behind socially and academically in a larger group. He would also not have received the attention he needed in a stricter environment".

"Completely different. Class to teacher ratios compared to a Montessori class - too many examples to list"

Eight of the parents mentioned the lack of SNA / one-to-one supports.

A number of parents mentioned the availability of school or class placements and, in particular, Special Class placements and Autism Classes in particular.

"Lack of ASD classes in the local area...."

"Lack of ASD classes in the local area. Waiting times for diagnosis with the HSE meant he wasn't able to be placed on a list for an appropriate class in time for primary school. Lack of supports available in primary school. On a waiting list for early intervention treatment from the HSE. No guidance given from **AIM** scheme about transitioning to primary school"

“We were told by primary school that there was no place available in Sept 2018”

“Lack of ASD units in Limerick and availability of SNA assistance in main stream school”

“Six refusals of main stream school that couldn't accommodate her needs. Preschool was easier but still difficult”

Two parents mentioned that the special education resource allocation systems were a factor for them

“As we were awaiting assessment (only just being done now after 2 years) we were worried the school would not have resources for him without a diagnosis”

“Staff training on anaphylaxis and unawareness of symptoms of hypo thyroidism also the SENO granted zero hours resource because she was unaware of the condition”

A number of parents highlighted school rules or norms for children, which they felt, were a barrier for their child progressing.

“I believe my child will not meet school expectations related to existing school rules. She can't follow commands due poor English and related to this poor communications skills. Mentally she is not ready for school”

“She has no speech so I was hoping a year would give her more time and also she finds it hard following instruction and sitting in the one spot”

“Our son needs to learn to play in an environment where he is free to explore his environment without restriction. The primary school requires certain skills physically, emotionally and socially and he has none of those and needs to maximum time and input in order to reach his potential”

Despite the above quotes it is the case that most respondents' concerns were expressed in relation to their child's 'school readiness' and the nature of the disability, development delay or health issue which their child had rather than the school's capacity to support their child.

## **AIM supports**

One of the surprising features which emerged from the administrative data was the low levels of overlap between **AIM** recipients and those with an **ECCE** overage exemption. The survey asked parents about their awareness of **AIM** and,

whether, their child was receiving **AIM** supports. The survey also asked parents about HSE funded supports, as a question had arisen as to whether the low level of overlap between **AIM** recipients and those with an **ECCE** overage exemption could be explained by the fact that those with an **Early Childhood Care and Education** overage exemption but not receiving targeted **AIM** supports were receiving in-pre-school supports from the HSE or from HSE funded agencies.

Tables 20 and 21 provide details of the levels of awareness of parents in the survey sample of **AIM** and of targeted **AIM** supports applied for and received. Sixty-eight or 77% of parents in the survey sample said that they were aware of **AIM**. Two thirds had discussed **AIM** with their pre-school provider and half of parents indicated that their child was receiving a targeted **AIM** support. Table 21 provides a breakdown of the targeted **AIM** supports received by children in the survey sample.

**Table 20 – Awareness and use of AIM Supports**

Are you aware that <b>AIM</b> supports are available to children with disabilities participating in the <b>ECCE</b> pre-school programme?	68
Did your pre-school provider discuss applying for <b>AIM</b> supports within the <b>ECCE</b> pre-school programme with you?	56
Did your pre-school provider apply for <b>AIM</b> supports specifically for your child?	51
Does your pre-school provider receive any <b>AIM</b> supports specifically for your child?	43

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 88

**Table 21 – AIM Levels Accessed**

<b>AIM Targeted Support Levels</b>	
Level 4	6
Level 5	3
Level 6	1
Level 7	24
Level 5 and 7	5
Could not recall or unclear	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 43

**Table 22 – AIM Supports by Disability Type**

Disability type	All	AIM	No- AIM	Not sure if receiving AIM
Intellectual disability	26	19	6	1
Communication difficulty	52	23	20	8
Physical disability	13	9	4	0
Sensory disability	16	11	3	2
Autism/ASD	18	10	5	2
Behavioural issues	13	7	3	3
Other	23	9	9	2

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 88

Table 22 provides a breakdown of those receiving **AIM** supports by disability type. In the survey sample of parents, there are a large group of children with a “Communication difficulty” and many of these children are not receiving **AIM** supports. Given that parents have to be involved in applying for targeted **AIM** supports it seems more likely that more of the “not sures” are not receiving targeted **AIM** supports. That suggests that in the survey sample somewhere between just under a quarter and just under a third of children with the **ECCE** overage exemption are children with a communication difficulty who do not have any targeted **AIM** supports.

**Table 23 – Receiving HSE funded in-pre-school support or HSE funded special pre-school by Disability Type**

Disability type	All	HSE funded in-pre- school support or special pre-school	No HSE funded in-pre- school support or special pre-school
Intellectual disability	26	8	18
Communication difficulty	52	8	44
Physical disability	13	6	7
Sensory disability	16	5	11
Autism/ASD	18	2	16
Behavioural issues	13	3	10
Other	23	3	20

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 88

The low levels of overlap between children with targeted **AIM** supports and children with **ECCE** overage exemption, which was indicated in the Administrative data, had prompted the question of whether many of the children

with an **ECCE** overage exemption but without any targeted **AIM** supports were receiving HSE or HSE funded in-preschool supports. Survey respondents were asked whether they received HSE or HSE funded in-preschool supports and a follow up question to describe those supports. Many of those who answered “yes” to the first question then provided details of HSE or HSE funded supports but not HSE or HSE funded in-preschool supports. Therefore, only those who described pre-school assistant hours and special pre-school placements were included. As Table 23 shows there were nine children receiving such supports in the survey sample. Eight of the nine children were children with an intellectual disability.

Interestingly, Table 24 shows that most of the children who were receiving HSE or HSE funded **in-preschool** supports were also children who were receiving targeted **AIM** supports. Of the thirty-five children in the survey sample not receiving targeted **AIM** supports only two children were receiving HSE or HSE funded supports in-preschool supports.

**Table 24 – Those Receiving AIM Targeted Supports and HSE funded in-pre-school support or HSE funded special pre-school**

	All	HSE Pre-school Special Needs assistance hours	Part-time with special needs pre-school
Receiving targeted <b>AIM</b> supports	43	5	3
Not sure if receiving targeted <b>AIM</b> supports	10	0	0
Not receiving targeted <b>AIM</b> supports	35	1	1
Not receiving targeted <b>AIM</b> supports, HSE Pre-school Special Needs assistance hours or part-time with special needs pre-school	33	N/A	N/A

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 88

**Table 25 - Those Receiving AIM Targeted Supports and HSE funded in-pre-school support or HSE funded special pre-school by Disability Type**

Disability type	All	Not receiving targeted <b>AIM</b> supports, HSE Pre-school Special Needs assistance hours or part-time with special needs pre-school	Not sure and not receiving targeted <b>AIM</b> supports, HSE Pre-school Special Needs assistance hours or part-time with special needs pre-school
Intellectual disability	26	4	5
Communication difficulty	52	18	26
Physical disability	13	2	2
Sensory disability	16	2	4
Autism/ASD	18	4	6
Behavioural issues	13	2	5
Other	23	9	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>43</b>

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 88

Table 25 shows that thirty-three (or 37.5%) parents in the survey sample said that their child who has an **ECCE** overage exemption didn't receive targeted **AIM** supports or HSE or HSE funded supports **in-preschool** supports. If the "not sures" are added this rises to forty-three or roughly half of the survey sample. Again, children with communication difficulties constitute a significant proportion of the total.

**Table 26 – Discussion of Aim Supports for those who received initial information on Early Childhood Care and Education overage exemptions from Preschool Staff**

	Yes	No	Not sure, can't remember	Total
<b>Pre-school Discussed Aim with Parents</b>	38 (68%)	13 (23%)	5 (9%)	56
<b>Pre-school Applied for Targeted Aim Supports</b>	33 (60%)	17 (30%)	6 (10%)	56

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 56

Of the fifty-eight parents in the survey sample who indicated that they received their initial information on **ECCE** overage exemptions from pre-school staff fifty-six provided details in relation to **AIM**. As Table 27 shows, just over two thirds of these parents also said that pre-school staff members discussed **AIM** with them. If the findings of survey sample are representative of the full population of those with an **ECCE** overage exemption it would be concerning that some pre-school staff are discussing **ECCE** overage exemptions with parents (somewhere between almost a quarter and a third of the relevant parents in the survey sample) but not **AIM** supports.

### Primary school

Table 27 shows the intended school placement of children in the survey sample. 78% of survey respondents plan to send their child to a mainstream class in a mainstream school.

**Table 27 – Primary School choices**

School place options	
A mainstream class in a mainstream primary school	67
A special class in a mainstream primary school	7
A special primary school	3
Don't know or haven't decided yet	9
Total	86

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs Survey of **ECCE** overage exemption parents. n 86

### Parent interviews

One of the survey questions asked parents whether-or-not they wished to take part in a follow-up phone interview with the National Disability Authority. From those who did consent, the National Disability Authority sought to recruit a mix of interviewees whose experience was broadly reflective of the overall survey sample. Factors such as gender, location, disability type, receiving/not receiving targeted **AIM** supports were taken into consideration. Twenty-one of the parents were recruited and interviewed over the phone in May and June 2018. An interview guide was developed. Interviews were semi-structured.

Some context, which needs to be borne in mind when reading the text below, is that each of the parents interviewed had experienced the impact that a second year of the **ECCE** programme had on their child. However, none of the parents could know whether-or-not outcomes would have been different for their child had they progressed to school in September 2017, which had very much been the plan for most of those interviewed. Secondly, the outcome in the interviewees' experience of the **ECCE** overage exemption process was getting a full second year of **ECCE** for their child (when other children were receiving between

either a one year of **ECCE** or a year and a number of months depending on their birth month). From 2018, all children will be able to avail of two full years of **Early Childhood Care and Education**. Therefore, those applying for an **ECCE** overage exemption in the future will be applying in a different context to the context experienced by the interviewees.

### **Benefit of time**

Interviewees were extremely positive about **ECCE** overage exemptions. Many interviewees described the progress that their child had made in the additional year in **Early Childhood Care and Education**. None of the interviewees expressed any regret that their child had not progressed to school in September 2017. Many described applying for an **ECCE** overage exemption as the ‘best decision that they had ever made’.

Interviewees confirmed the survey findings that, by in large, parents did not consider or apply for an **ECCE** overage exemption in advance of their child being in an **ECCE** setting. The decision to apply for an **ECCE** overage exemption was brought about because parents felt (typically after an initial consultation with the pre-school staff) that their child needed more time in pre-school or because more time was needed to arrange assessments, reports or conformation of a particular educational placement.

A number of interviewees mentioned that they had come to the decision that if their application for the **ECCE** overage exemption was turned down they would not have sent their child to school, but instead pay privately for them to be in pre-school, because they believed so strongly that their child ‘needed more time’ to be ready for school.

“With a little more time we feel he just might be OK for junior infants next year”

“We had intended to send in September 2017 but decided to give him more time and see what the assessments done as part of the AON [Assessment of Need under the **Disability Act 2005**] would determine. We did not realise that you needed to apply for an overage exemption until the pre-school teacher explained the **ECCE** age range rules. But, we had made our decision. He was going to stay in **ECCE** either way even if we had to pay privately”

### **Information and joined up services**

In describing how they came to decide to apply for an **ECCE** overage exemption, many interviewees described their experience from when their child was first diagnosed with a disability and/or health condition or from when they

became aware that their child's development was behind his or her peers in some respect.

Many interviewees described how fragmented the system of support for young children was and how hard it was to not only access services but to access basic information. While one could say that it is not directly related to **ECCE** overage exemption, many parents were describing their past experience of delays and missed opportunities which resulted, they believed, in their child not being 'ready to go to school'.

"I was getting most of my information from social media and other parents. I was completely at sea as how was I supposed to know who to turn to or where to go – I had no idea as to what the options were .....eventually, when I went to the local school which had a class for children with autism I was told "you're too late...we are full for next year"

"Parents have to go figure out everything. It is back to the parents to demand and drive everything and even then the system is very slow in responding... little knowledge of **AIM** and, even then, it was left to the parents to go figure out what levels of support your child may need ...processes are not aligned – so even when I got assessments etc from HSE these were "of no value" when it came to the **AIM** process.

"Huge sense of having to constantly start over again at each of the different stages.....even down to having to photocopying reports and explain it all again when it came to **SENO** etc"

"I think that the pre-school supports and school supports are very disconnected. I think that **AIM** and the supports available in school should be joined up..... When we spoke to the Early Intervention Team, who knew our daughter, about engaging with the school in advance of September on differentiating the curriculum they said that they would have to wait till the infants teacher called them. That seems crazy to me. I think that support provided at home, in the pre-school and in school need to be joined up"

Even basic information on **AIM** and the **ECCE** scheme was an issue for some parents.

"It was only in response to an **AIM** application that the pre-school became aware that he was actually outside the age range for **ECCE**"

“They [national disability service provider] didn’t know about **AIM**. There was confusion initially as we were informed that he may not qualify for **AIM** because he gets supports from [name of national disability service provider]... a lot of parents don’t know about **AIM**”

It was clear from many interviewees that the **ECCE** overage exemption had become a necessity for them they believed because other parts of the system that provide support for young children had not been available to them in a timely way.

“Getting the assessment on time and getting whatever help and support the child needed in a timely manner may have meant that he would have been ready in September 2017. But parents feel that the extra year has made a huge difference”

“If my daughter had received early intervention at the appropriate time she may have been ready for school in September 2017 and I may not have had to give up my career”

“Well obviously if we had gotten the diagnosis earlier he would have been able to go to school in September 2017 as a Unit place could have been organised for him. We first sought a diagnosis for him from the HSE when he was two years of age. He was on a HSE waiting for two and a half years. So, by the time we got the diagnosis from the private psychologist it was too late to make arrangements for September 2017”

“Getting assessments on time and getting the help and support he needed in a timely manner may have meant that he would have been ready for school in September 2017”

“The impact of not accessing the required supports was that we lost sixteen months of professional intervention that would have made a difference. We had been accessing a private therapist and this was challenging financially, as we were down to one salary [parent had taken a career break to support their child with a disability]. Eventually, we went for the AON [Assessment of Need under the **Disability Act 2005**] and got a diagnosis and a better understanding of what was wrong and access to a multi-disciplinary team”

Although, not directly related to the **ECCE** overage exemption review, most of the interviewees mentioned that they paid privately for a substantial amount of

therapy, assessments and other supports related to their child's disability. Many parents also mentioned giving up careers or taking career breaks to try to coordinate their child's supports and get them ready for school.

### **Views on children's readiness for school**

Interviewees described why they were concerned about their child. It was clear in the parent interviews that in many cases the parent had very strong views on their child's school readiness. In some cases, the professionals appeared to be supporting them in their application rather than professionals proactively advising that children are not ready for school.

“Entirely our decision...the pre-school said he was not ready. [service provider name] thought it was ok for him to go once the right supports were put in place... at the end of the day we felt he was not ready and eventually got a psychologist's letter with the support of the Speech and Language Therapist to back this up. [service provider name] agreed in the end once we had made the decision”

How the parents described **school readiness** differed significantly.

“We weren't confident that he would do well... he had no interest in reading or writing and no concept of numbers... I started school myself very young and I think that being younger was a drawback though my whole time in school”

“It's really to do with immaturity, only in the last few months he is interested in letters and words. There is the speech delay and he has a lot of tantrums”

“We just wanted to get him into a better space in himself to be able to go”

“We felt that he just wasn't ready... he could hold a conversation but you might need to step in and explain to someone what he said... we worried that if he went to school in September 2017 he might be held back”

“Poor grip was the immediate issue but also poor concentration and the ability to follow instructions and sit down”

The benefit of more time was also conveyed in relation to parents, many of whom expressed their own anxiety about their child with a disability or delay starting school.

“For me just having the additional year was a life-saver”

Additionally, some parents interviewed were educated in countries other than Ireland where the school starting age was 6 or 7 and who believe that 4 or 5 was very young to start school even for children who had no disability or delay.

“In [name of another country] where we are from, children go to school at 7 so I think that 4 is very young”

“I went to school at 6 in [name of another country] and I don’t think that I was ready at that age for some of the tasks that school children have to do. I was horrified when we thought that we might have to send our son to school at 4 years and 9 months”

### **Primary school environment**

In keeping with the survey findings, not that many of the interviewees raised concern about the Special Education supports that their child would receive in primary school. Although some had, as noted above, used the time afforded by the **ECCE** overage exemption to access what they perceived to be the appropriate reports or to ensure that their child got a particular education placement.

Some parents raised the issue of primary school curriculum and expectations.

“I was conscious of the importance of play for him. I think that there needs to be more information on this and what is done in junior infants”.

This raises some questions, perhaps, as to how well **Aistear** is embedded in primary schools or, at least, how well **Aistear** is understood by parents and communicated to them.

As mentioned above, many parents interviewed emphasised the things that their child would not have been able to do in September 2017, which ranged from writing to being mature enough to understand the implications of their allergy but most frequently related to sitting down and concentrating or staying on task. This raises questions about how some of these issues are dealt with in the infant years in primary schools but also perhaps questions about how schools’ capacity to deal with these issues is communicated to parents.

Where parents had engaged with schools the conversation often seemed to be that parents or perhaps pre-school teachers know best in relation to school readiness rather than a conversation around how children at different levels of development are supported to participate.

“I did speak to the teacher informally and she said that if we think that he is not ready then we shouldn’t send him”

“The school principal said that you’d be very unwise not to listen to the pre-school teacher as they know her. They said that she would be fine in infants but first class might be more difficult. They said that pre-school teachers know their kids and they generally get these decisions right”

Many interviewees expressed the view that despite their child’s disability or delay that in primary school there would be more pressure to have certain skills or behave in a certain way.

“He wasn’t ready. He wasn’t ready to be an environment where there is pressure to develop. I am a teacher and I knew that if he started the phone calls would start, that I’d be in and out of the school being told he can’t do this and he can’t do that. I didn’t want that for him. He wasn’t ready”

### **Flexibility**

As mentioned above, most interviewees described how their child had participated in their **ECCE** year, initially in anticipation of progressing to school the following September, but that during the course of that year, they had come to the view that their child was not ready to progress and had applied for an **ECCE** overage exemption. A **small minority** of parents mentioned that because of their child’s disability their child could not attend **ECCE** full time when they were within the **ECCE** age range and so flexibility was required to allow for a period of part-time **ECCE** followed by a period of full-time **ECCE** prior to starting school.

“I think that a lot of children with Down Syndrome would only be able to attend **ECCE** part-time when they are 3. In our first year of the **ECCE** programme we probably had 40 or 50 appointments [with therapists and other supports] for our daughter. I kept her at home on Friday just to allow her to recover because she was so tired. I think that needs to be taken into account. I think that there needs to be flexibility”

### **Earlier start in the Early Childhood Care and Education programme**

Given that all children will be able to participate in two years of the **ECCE** programme from September 2018 interviewees were asked if they thought that availing of two years of **ECCE** would have enabled their child to go to school in September 2017. Given that the children, who had availed of the overage exemption were in their second year of **ECCE**, the question related to whether

the parents believed that if their child had started **ECCE** earlier and completed two years before they reached the **ECCE** upper age limit would they have been ready to progress to school with their age peers. Interviewees' views on this question were mixed. Some believed that if they had been able to access supports in a timely way and had been able to avail of the **ECCE** programme earlier that their child may have been ready to start school in September 2017. However, others believed that regardless of when they had started in the **ECCE programme**, their child would not have been able to start school until they were nearly 6 years of age.

“In theory yes [child’s name] would have progressed with age peers after 2 years of **ECCE** but that very much depends on what supports are available”

“Probably not in my case as it had to do with maturity and before he turned five years of age he was neither emotionally or speech-wise mature enough for school”

### **Birth month effect and children without a recognised disability**

Some parents highlighted that part of their motivation for applying for an **ECCE** overage exemption was that their child missed out on additional **ECCE** ‘year’ because of their birth month. This is in the context of multiple entry points with differing **ECCE** entitlement for children depending on which intake they qualified for.

“He was very close to the **ECCE** eligibility cut off. If he had been born a few weeks later he would automatically have been entitled to the extra **ECCE** year”

“He was only over the cut off by 11 days to qualify for a second year”

Some parents were more explicit and suggested that they didn’t feel that the requirement to have a disability to avail of an **ECCE** overage exemption was appropriate

“I think that there should be less emphasis on disability for children getting an exemption. Some children are just not ready and I don’t think that that should need to be described as a disability”

“I think that the overage exemption has made a remarkable difference to our child’s life. The only change that I would make is that I would make it clearer that it is not restricted to children with a diagnosed disability”

## **7. Engagement with stakeholders – Early Childhood Care and Education providers, Education and Health professionals**

### **Roundtable with Education stakeholders**

The National Disability Authority held a formal roundtable discussion on overage exemptions with education stakeholders on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April. Attendees included representatives from:

- National Disability Authority
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs
- Department of Education and Skills
- National Educational Psychological Service
- National Council for Special Education
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
- Aim - Better Start
- Túsla

Some of the themes which emerged were

### **Understanding parents' motivations**

- Pre-school years can be difficult years for parents of children with disabilities. Many parents may still be coming to terms with their child's disability. Parents may wish to defer school entry because they believe that their child may be ready for mainstream (rather than special school) if their child is older
- Parents' views of 'school readiness' is often shaped by their own school experience, which is likely to have been in a period where there was much less support available for children with special needs in schools
- More generally, there was a view that some parents have a misunderstanding of 'school readiness', in that they believe that children need to have attained certain academic skills before they are ready for school
- Where pre-school is a positive experience for children with disabilities and their parents the familiarity of pre-school can be hugely reassuring for parents
- The lower ratios in pre-school can also seem like a significant advantage to parents considering an overage exemption

## Transitions

- Agreement that there was a lot of work to be done on the pre-school to primary school transition for children with disabilities. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has done work looking at the concept of the 'ready school', that is looking at how schools can ensure that they are ready for the child rather than looking at the child's 'school readiness'
- Creating 'ready schools' is about ensuring that certain structures are in place in schools. It is not a quick fix. Having structures in place to support all students takes time and effort but the 'ready school' should be the focus
- There is a disconnect between the supports at pre-school and at the primary level. It is understandable that it is confusing for parents. We need to get to a place where it is easier for parents to understand what supports will be in place for their child in school
- There are still barriers to pre-schools and schools sharing information. While there are examples of where this is done well locally there are also examples of where local pre-school and schools do not engage with each other at all
- If pre-schools staff are to be more involved in supporting transitions this will require structures to be put in place and funding to allow for planning and work on supporting transitions

## Impact on children

- Children being significantly older than their class peers is less of a problem in the younger primary years but it can become more problematic as children reach 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class and secondary school. Being bigger and more physically developed can have an impact on self-esteem
- Children in special schools are typically educated until they are 18 so for some children a delayed school start will mean that they will have less years in school

## Continuum of education

- Universal early education is very new in Ireland. From 2018 we will have two full years of **ECCE** followed by primary and post-primary school. That is now our continuum of education but it is not clear that it has been considered as a continuum. The question now should be how do we support children with disabilities across the continuum of education

## Discussion with early years stakeholders

The National Disability Authority met with a small group of Early Years providers in February 2018.

Early Years stakeholders believed that **ECCE** overage exemptions can be beneficial for some children and families. Children and family circumstances differ so much and the **ECCE** overage exemption allows a degree of flexibility, which was required by some children and families.

Examples of where Early Years stakeholders believe that **ECCE** overage exemption have been beneficial include:

- Where a child is not toilet trained
- Where a child has been in a special pre-school but the family wishes that they would do a year of mainstream **ECCE** before starting school
- A disability or special educational need was not evident when a child started pre-school and the family needed time to accept it
- Children with communication and some behavioural difficulties who don't have a diagnosed disability
- Where a family hasn't got reports in on time to secure an SNA in primary school
- Where the local primary school is less than enthusiastic about enrolling a child with a disability
- Where a family is very anxious about their child starting school
- Where a child has some development delay and they are going to be very young in their class as a result of their birth month

Early Years stakeholders believe that the implementation of **Aistear** in primary schools is patchy. A play-based curriculum is important for all children but it really suits some children with disabilities. Until the infants years are more play based some parents and in particular parents of children with disabilities will be reluctant to move their children from an **ECCE** environment.

Engagement between parents of children with disabilities and Special Education Needs Organisers is often not as good as it could be. The Early Years stakeholders felt that there is nobody saying to these parents that their child will receive the supports they need in school.

Flexibility on **ECCE** programme participation is going to be required even post-September 2018 when all children will have two years of Early Childhood Care and Education. Some children, early years stakeholders believed, may need a third year of Early Childhood Care and Education.

## Discussion with health stakeholders

The National Disability Authority met with a small group of health stakeholders, all of whom are clinicians with experience of working with young children, in May 2018.

Health stakeholders believed that it was in the best interests of the vast majority of children with disabilities to progress to school with their age peers, though in very exceptional circumstances delayed school entry could be in a child's interests.

In the experience of the Health stakeholders the split intake had been valuable for children with a disability as there are cases where a child might not be ready for **ECCE** in September but might, for example, be ready in January.

Health stakeholders believed that most children with a disability, diagnosed with a disability at birth or very early in life, would have a plan in place to ensure that they are ready for school with their age peers, including having whatever reports are required to access supports in the education system. However, for some children whose disability emerges closer to school starting age there can be challenges. For example, by the time some families receive a diagnosis of Autism there may not be time to secure a place in Special Class for the following September and Health stakeholders were aware of **ECCE** overage exemptions being applied for in such contexts.

In considering possible improvements to the **ECCE** overage exemption, Health stakeholders cautioned against a standardised health / diagnostic assessment being subsequently used as a gatekeeping mechanism.

## 8. Open policy debate

### Introduction

The Open Policy Debate, hosted by the Departments of Children and Youth Affairs and Education and Science, was held on 28 May 2018 in the Mansion House, Dublin, to explore the issues and possible solutions to the proposed changes to the overage exemptions within the **ECCE** scheme.

The Open Policy Debate formed part of a wider review of the matter undertaken by the National Disability Authority. The event brought together parents, practitioners in the Early Years Sector, teachers, HSE clinicians working with young children, relevant statutory agencies, and organisations involved in the delivery of the **ECCE** programme and with expertise on children and families who had availed of the exemption in the past.

A Background Paper and an Agenda were issued in advance of the Open Policy Debate (see Appendix 4.1). The meeting was addressed by Ms Katherine Zappone TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The process on the day involved short inputs from experts, discussion in small, mixed groups, feedback to plenary sessions, and a final plenary discussion.

### The debate

Throughout the event, there was considerable consistency in the issues identified as requiring attention. As the **ECCE** programme itself develops, and there is positive and planned transition process of children from pre- to primary school as standard practice, then it was anticipated that the need for **ECCE** overage exemptions would reduce.

The detailed notes at Appendix 4. record observations, ideas and proposed solutions from small group discussions at the Open Policy Debate. This summary concentrates on the priorities which were identified during the Open Policy Debate.

Overall, the outcome of the Open Policy Debate suggests that **ECCE** overage exemptions are symptomatic, rather than, central and that the priority is to tackle systemic issues, dealing with a range of issues in parallel. As the systemic issues are addressed then the demand for exemptions are expected to reduce. Some of the issues identified are already subject of attention by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Department of Education and Skills, and other Agencies, as the Background Paper sets out, and there will undoubtedly be improvements on different fronts in the months and years to come.

However, for parents and many others attending the Open Policy Debate, and for those with children with special/additional needs making choices now and in the short term, medium-term changes are viewed as of little advantage. The window of opportunity for the individual child is small and if missed there are life-long consequences.

### **The Early Childhood Care and Education programme**

It is important to note that the participants in the Debate were generally positive about the **ECCE** programme, which has been in place since 2010. They recognised that it is a relatively short period in which to establish a national intervention, acknowledging that it is already making a difference to children, including, those with special/additional needs, and that it is still a programme in development.

In an evolving situation where there is ambition across Government to realise an Early Years provision that is of a high standard, the challenge is how best to introduce the changes with the maximum benefit and the least disruption, as systems gear up to the standards required. Further, the changes happening in both the pre- and primary school systems demands strong collaboration between the two Government Departments, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills, if the changes are to be well planned and executed without gaps or inconsistencies

### **Guiding principles**

At a high level of principle, underpinning statements emerged during the Open Policy Debate which should guide the **ECCE** programme and the decisions required, and the evolution of overall pre-school, pre- to primary school, and primary school system coherence. They are:

- The child at the centre, the child's needs as paramount
- The parent as an informed and engaged decision maker, respected as the primary educator
- The providers and practitioners working in collaboration to create effective services and
- Streamlined pathways
- The policy, practice and supports facilitating the above

### **Language**

A final point to consider is the use of language. On the one hand there is a commitment to inclusion and integration, but the use of the terms 'special' and

‘additional’ in describing the needs of some children, may have the effect of differentiation. An alternative approach is to refer to all children as having diverse needs. A related point was that supports to children with ‘special’ or ‘additional’ needs, can result in ‘inclusive segregation’, rather than supports in place across a setting which are meeting the diverse needs of many children.

## **Systemic issues**

The Open Policy Debate resulted in observations about the **ECCE** exemption system and a more comprehensive set of observations about the overall systemic issues, which should be addressed. Each is summarised here:

### **8.1 The overage exemption**

This issue prompted the event, and the discussion on the day suggested that as the whole system improved then the requirement for **ECCE** overage exemptions would reduce, although it might never disappear completely if a child centred, as opposed to an administrative, approach was at the root of decision-making. There was concern that if the exemption is not available now and in the next few years, then some children would lose out on the additional benefits intended by the extension of the universal programme to two years.

In considering the issues, much of the discussion focussed on the wider systemic matters, rather than, an argument being made for the **ECCE** overage exemption in isolation. However, while none of the contributions suggest the exemption should disappear, many identified flaws in how it is operating, and that these could be addressed. For example, there are suggestions about explaining the purpose of the **ECCE** overage exemption more clearly, defining the criteria and rules for application so that it is led by the needs of the child, linking it to the **AIM** profile, and ensuring that parents are fully aware of how and when to apply. There were questions as to the level of analysis available on the use and effectiveness of the exemptions to-date, and that more time is necessary to assess effectiveness.

In practice, the numbers availing of the exemption at about five hundred annually, was viewed as small, and capable of reducing naturally as other parts of the system improved and parents became more confident and could see that the transition to primary school would be successful for their child.

One participant posed the interesting question as to whether there would be a need for exemptions at all, if a parent could choose which 2 years to send their child to pre-school, provided the child reached Primary School by the age of 6 years. An exception to this might be the child who receives a diagnosis late, or where it becomes apparent in the **ECCE** cycle that the child is not ready for primary school.

### Different scenarios

To aid the discussions at the Open Policy Debate participants were given a series of possible scenarios to consider (see below) and most tables gave some thought to each of the alternatives. Generally, Option B was considered the best of the three outlined, however, it is important to note that it was not endorsed as a solution.

**Table 28 - Scenarios for Addressing the overage exemption Issue - a prompt to the Debate**

<b>Factors for consideration</b>	<b>Scenario A</b>	<b>Scenario B</b>	<b>Scenario C</b>	<b>Preferred optimum option from the table</b>
<b>Number of intakes</b>	Single (September)	Single (September)	Two (September or January)	
<b>Minimum start age</b>	2 years 8 months to 3 years 7 months (depending on date of birth)	2 years 6 month to 3 years 6 months (depending on date of birth)	2 years 8 months to 3 years 7 months (depending on date of birth)	
<b>Max offer</b>	Up to two programme years	Up to two programme years	Up to two programme years	
<b>Maximum / minimum school starting age</b>	4 years 8 months to five years 7 months	4 years 6 months to 5 years 11 months	4 years 6 months to 5 years 7 months	
<b>Flexibility</b>	Fixed (depending on date of birth)	Choice of which September you start	Two choices of start point	
<b>Advantages</b>	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	
<b>Disadvantages</b>	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	
<b>Overage exemption possible options</b>	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	

In summary, there are two arguments advanced for the **ECCE** overage exemption –

1. Ensuring that all children receive the full two-year value of **ECCE** and
2. As an important mechanism in establishing the best possible basis for transition to Primary School for a child with special/additional needs, where the overall suite of child and family support systems are not yet functioning optimally.

Overall, participants inclined to the view that the **ECCE** overage exemption should be retained for a period, about two years or so, with clearer guidelines for application, better information to parents about its function, and monitoring and evaluation of its take up and the impact on the child to inform future decision-making.

## 8.2 Developing the whole system

The Debate focussed more on the overall system than on exemptions, and on gaps, anomalies and development priorities. In identifying priorities, the following issues were consistently raised:

- (a) **Implementing Government Policy commitments**, in relation to children, education, disability, health and related matters, that will build the comprehensive system of supports for children and families
- (b) **The Pre-school and Primary school systems** and related support structures and programmes
- (c) **Transitions** and transition planning from pre- to primary school
- (d) **Communication**

In addition to the principle of a child-centred approach in everything, two issues are repeated across all of the discussions:

- **Flexibility** as a necessary component of all systems if responding to a child's needs and readiness, both socially and academically
- **Early intervention** as critical, and ensuring the necessary resources, teams, specialists, information and access are in place across the various systems a vital step in delivering the appropriate supports and services to the child, supporting parents and families to make fully informed decisions

## **8.2.1 Implementing Government Policy commitments**

Participants noted that many Government policy commitments presented a positive approach to tackling the systemic issues affecting children with special/additional needs. However, the inconsistent and/or slow rate of implementation by different Departments and/or Agencies, results in experiences where children with additional/special needs do not receive the holistic, joined up and consistent support and services intended.

For example, the absence of full implementation of the national policy on Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People, creates gaps or limits in service provision. Inconsistencies along these lines results in a fragmented service map. Parents at the Open Policy Debate also reported that fragmented service provision can lead to parents' choice of education setting for their child being restricted.

### **8.2.2 The Pre-school and Primary school systems**

The parent of a child with additional/special needs is navigating a system which is under construction. While the Primary School system is well embedded, in practice the relatively fast shift to a system in which there is state funded early years programmes in the lead up to starting primary school inevitably shifts the equilibrium. The emphasis on children attending mainstream, rather than, special schools has also changed the environment.

While everyone is aware that the Early Years sector is still 'forming' and there is inevitable change and development, these developments and others are also changing things in the Primary School.

Suggestions made that would improve the overall system and enhance skills included:

- Close collaboration and a joint approach to planning is required across all aspects of the pre- and primary school from the work of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Department of Education and Skills right through to the individual pre- and primary schools on the ground
- Mapping and streamlining all the available programmes, schemes and supports so the parent can easily see and understand what is available (and in doing this iron out any confusion or anomalies)
- Ensuring that there is a common set of supports available countrywide
- More joint training of the workforce across the settings to enhance skills and increase understanding between what should be partner services

- A greater emphasis on teacher training on working with children with disabilities
- In-service training provision for pre-school staff
- A better alignment of the **AIM** and Special Need Assistant's (SNA) support
- Speech and Language, and Occupational Therapy services capable of the earliest intervention
- Effective mechanisms for raising awareness among parents so that they can access professionals and services easily and quickly

Other issues raised during the discussions included:

### **Age limits**

It was noted, generally, that exemptions arise because of age limits and there were questions as to the necessity for so many exemptions. The 'to primary school by age 6', was broadly accepted (although, it was pointed out that in other European countries start dates are later), but all age limits received some criticism and questions such as:

- Why not have the **ECCE** provision up to age 6 so there would not be a gap where a parent decides to send their child to school at 6?
- Why not have the primary school start requirement as 'during the year that a child is 6'?
- Why is it a requirement that children are in Senior Infants by 6.5 years – this is anomaly if children are permitted to start at age 6?
- Why are there school specific starting ages in some enrolment policies, which can have the effect of leaving a child without a place?
- Why do early intervention teams only support children up to age 5?
- Why have the lower **ECCE** start date? Is it too young and is it creating a gap on completion and before school start date?
- Why are some children too young for **AIM** supports and why is there a limit of 3 hours where a child might need more time?

The **ECCE** Programme starting age, at 2 years and 8 months, was noted as, possibly, pushing some children into primary school two years later, when they may be still too young, or for others leaving a gap between **ECCE** and primary school which parents may not be able to afford to fill with private pre-school.

Generally, the date of birth criteria was not seen as a fitting way to determine what was right for any child, and that all children have diverse needs and develop all their abilities differently.

## Anomalies

The Open Policy Debate identified inconsistencies/anomalies in the system, such as:

- Children getting exemptions but not **AIM**
- Different specialists recommending different things
- Diagnosis not required for **AIM** but required for other services/resources in Primary School
- Diagnosis required but long waiting times for assessments
- Different assessments required, instead of a single assessment to inform all decisions

A further set of anomalies, cited by the participants, related to the non-alignment of different programmes and age/deadline requirements – for example:

- The requirement that children transfer out of senior infants at 6 years and 6 months
- The lack of alignment between the home tuition, Autism (ASD) provision and pre-school provision
- The Department of Education and Skills **Early Start Programme**<sup>11</sup> as a one-year programme rather than two
- The need for greater alignment within the HSE and HSE funded services nationwide

Generally, better collaboration and engagement between the different parts of the system – Government Departments and Agencies - would help to reduce such anomalies and suggestions included:

- Development of protocols to support engagement across all programmes and systems (for example, **Aistear**, **AIM**, **Better Start**, etc)
- Systems auditing to identify inconsistencies and unintended consequences in implementation, or contradictions in practice

## Assessments

In many cases, children's special/additional needs are not diagnosed until early childhood, and delays in assessment can mean that early interventions are also delayed. Cost can be another factor in delayed assessment. Further, the need for multiple assessments and the lack of sharing of assessments creates silos of

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<sup>11</sup> The **Early Start Programme** is a pre-school project established in 1994 in 40 primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage

information. Some participants reported vagueness or inadequate definition in assessments, which resulted in difficulties in determining which services and when they could be provided.

Improving access, streamlining and standardising the assessment systems, and ensuring the information can be shared between parents, professionals and practitioners, would support speedier and comprehensive supports and planning, aimed at meeting the needs of the child.

Whatever the route to the assessment of the child, the child's profile must be accurate, and the importance of the process of reaching sign-off with parents, and the supports needed to do this, should not be underestimated. The idea of a 'passport' suggested by some participants may offer a universal approach to a single and central record which is owned by the child/parents but accessible to providers, teachers and others directly involved, including those making assessments.

### **Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)**

Participants spoke of the value of the **AIM** working directly in pre-school settings, enabling providers to engage with parents, with accessibility not dependent on a diagnosis. The **AIM** assessment timeline would benefit from a clearer more defined process with a timeline for application to assessment, and adequate time to plan for additional/special staff in services.

It was suggested that AIM could provide supports within a transition plan where an overlap of the team supporting the child in pre-school could lead into primary. Such supports, continuing into Primary School, can reduce the incongruity of the child's experience in moving from one setting to another, and there was reference to the importance of **AIM** in **DEIS** denominated schools.

There were practical examples of how this streamlined support is being delivered in some services, such as, accompanying a child into the primary setting for a period of overlap to ease the change.

However, such ideas depend on the resources being available and the quality of the engagement between the pre-school/practitioner and the school/teacher.

### **Leadership for INCLUSION (LINC)**

**LINC** in the Early Years national programme was launched in 2016 and designed to enhance inclusion of children with additional needs in the **ECCE** settings. While not long in place, **LINC** was considered a valuable addition in increasing confidence and skill in practitioners working in inclusive setting with children with special/additional needs, and ensuring its national reach is important.

### **Aistear in Primary School**

**Aistear**, the Early Childhood Curricular Framework, was acknowledged as a programme enabling work with children across ages, and one which must be embedded in the Primary School. For this, teacher training must include **Aistear** not as an option but as core to the curriculum.

### **Capacity issues**

It was noted that there are capacity issues in the pre-school setting and that there is a pressure on staffing as the opportunities, and better terms and conditions in other areas, attract Early Years staff. These unintended consequences of developments in one area must be monitored, and in planning a service development, anticipated.

Varying start dates for children was also identified as impacting on capacity, both in the pre- and primary school.

Some concerns were raised that not all providers may be willing to take children with special/additional needs in pre-schools, generally or without the supports being in place first. While this was largely anecdotal, and explained variously as related to lack of confidence, skills or capacity, it led to discussion as to whether this should be allowed within a State funded programme committed to inclusion. Completing the roll out of training and effective support measures were confirmed as the priority, with the **LINC** programme offering further support in confidence building.

### **Change planning**

There was an acceptance that policy, systems and practice will continue to change, but such change must be well considered, evidence based, coordinated with all other agencies and systems, and focussed on constant quality improvements. To that end participants suggested that research on the impact of schemes (or in this case exemptions) must inform decisions on change, which should then be rolled out carefully.

### **8.2.3 Transitions**

There was general agreement that as the child moves from pre- to primary school a plan is necessary that involves parents, pre-school practitioners and the primary school, as well as the related services that support and provide services to the child and their family.

For the child, the process should be seamless, with the supportive and developmental experience of early years learning settings continuing into Primary School. To achieve this, both the school and the child must be 'ready', whereas there has tended to be a focus mainly on child readiness. In the discussions, it

was apparent that one of the anxieties that parents of children with additional/special needs have is that it is the school that may not be ready for their child, and that progress made in the **ECCE** setting will be lost. Proper transition planning is key to showing parents that the supports and systems are in place before the child reaches primary school, and a transition plan can deliver a continuity of care with the same team involved for a period, which will add to a more seamless experience for the child.

To ensure that this planning happens, proper protocols and policies were viewed as vital to support even-handed and child centred systems and approaches, with some participants suggesting that the transition planning process should be mandatory. Such planning also implies that the various parties involved are adequately informed and resourced to engage fully and an example of under resourcing given was that of the early intervention team for the children's disability network. However, some of the suggestions were simple, such as visits by pre-school practitioners to primary schools and vice versa.

A further issue raised related to data protection/barriers to information sharing. This should be reviewed to deliver systematic and appropriate data sharing aimed at enhancing the transition experience of the child.

For an effective transition, the participants at the Debate considered that the plan should be settled where at all possible, in year 2 of the **ECCE** period, so that the necessary overlapping period can begin, and the school is ready to welcome and support each child.

### **8.2.4 Communication**

Throughout the Debate there were extensive concerns about poor or inadequate communication across the system and services. It is unclear who is responsible for setting out and coordinating the communication requirements across the system, but from the perspective of parents in particular this is a priority.

A strong suggestion emerged that there should be a communication strategy which maps out the content, lines of communication, standards, where responsibility lies and the means that will empower parents and facilitate effectiveness among all those involved in the planning and delivery of the supports and services. A 'whole of early years' communications approach, which once again places the child and their parent at the centre, and responds to their need for information and navigation.

During the Debate. Suggestions about improved communications placed an emphasis on:

- Much better and easily accessible information available to all parents and, particularly, to parents with children with special/additional needs. This would help them to know and understand what is available and its relevance to their child, across the entire early years cycle and into the primary setting, enabling them to think ahead and plan from an informed position for their child
- Streamlining the communication between practitioners and other professionals involved in supporting and providing services to children and families, to facilitate interventions and support at the earliest opportunity, and to continue supports in a seamless way
- Establishing universal and effective communication protocols for pre- and primary schools, which support the transition planning for each
- Effective communications - ensure parents have clear, understandable information and explanations, most particularly in matters concerning their own child, enabling them to sign off on their child's profile and make informed choices at each stage of their child's life.

## 9. Appendices

### Appendix I - Acknowledgements

Open Policy Debate Report prepared by Caroline McCamley, and|Ampersand.

### Appendix 2 – What the international evidence tells us about school exemptions / deferments from other jurisdictions?

There are varieties of practices around the process of applying for, and the granting of, school exemptions. Different jurisdictions have different legal frameworks governing deferred school entry, different infrastructure and systems for managing applications, and different provisions for children with disabilities or special education needs seeking these deferments. The provisions for deferral are more explicit in some jurisdictions than in others.

This section provides a comparative review of the processes England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, New Zealand and the United States.

#### Jurisdictions with defined systems for deferring

##### England

##### Compulsory school age

Compulsory school age is set out in section 8 of the **Education Act 1996 and the Education (Start of Compulsory School Age) Order 1998**. A child reaches compulsory school age on the prescribed day following his or her fifth birthday (or on his or her fifth birthday if it falls on a prescribed day). The prescribed days are 31<sup>st</sup> of December, 31<sup>st</sup> of March and 31<sup>st</sup> of August (p. 24)<sup>12</sup>. The compulsory school age applies to all children.

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<sup>12</sup>

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/389388/School\\_Admision\\_Code\\_2014\\_-\\_19\\_Dec.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/389388/School_Admision_Code_2014_-_19_Dec.pdf)

The child ceases to be of compulsory on the last Friday in June in the school year they turn sixteen and this is the case regardless of whether or not the child has been educated with their normal age cohort. For children who defer, this may result in them reaching the upper compulsory age prior to taking GCSEs and in this case, the child cannot be obliged to attend. In 2015, a change to the law affected the age at which children finish education – though the child can still leave school at 16, they are obliged to continue education in some form until they are 18, for example, by attending college, undertaking an apprenticeship, or a combination of part-time work and study.

### **Legal frameworks and policy**

The **School Admission Code 2014** gives statutory guidance on the admission process for maintained schools (schools maintained by local authorities, for example, academies, free schools), which are managed by admission authorities. The **School Admission Code 2014** provides the legal framework for admission authorities to discharge their functions regarding the admission of children to schools under their remit (Table 29). Two articles in particular make reference to deferred school entry – Articles 2.16 and 2.17.

Article 2.16 details the statutory obligation of admission authorities to provide for the admission of children in the September after their fourth birthday, and where a child is offered a place at school, it must be made clear:

1. That the child is entitled to a full-time place in the September following their fourth birthday.
2. The child's parents can choose to defer the date their child is admitted to school until later in the school year but not beyond the compulsory school age, and not beyond the beginning of the final term of the school year for which the request to defer was made.
3. Where the parents wish, children may attend part-time until later in the school year but not beyond the point at which they reach compulsory school age.

Article 2.17 of the **School Admission Code 2014** details provision for the admission of children outside their normal age group, for instance in the case that the child has experienced health problems, where the child is gifted, or in the case of summer-born children.

The Department of Education published a non-statutory advisory document<sup>13</sup> accompanying the **School Admission Code 2014** aimed at local authorities, schools admission authorities and parents who may be considering deferring their child’s entry to school. Though the advice specifies deferment in relation to summer-born children, it is useful in outlining deferments in general. It includes details on making decisions in the child’s best interest, submission of supporting evidence, and frequently asked questions in relation to deferral (among other things).

Admission authorities are obligated to uphold the **School Admission Code 2014** and apply it in a practical way within their district. They compile admission arrangements for all schools in their area and these are presented in a single document. Deferred school entry is a key component of these admission authority policies. Generally, the policies detail what children are eligible to defer and the processes for requesting deferment in these cases<sup>14</sup>.

**Table 29 Admission Authorities and categories of school<sup>15</sup>**

Type of School	The admission authority
A community school	The local authority
A voluntary controlled school	
A foundation school	The governing body
A voluntary aided school	

<sup>13</sup>

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/389448/Summer\\_born\\_admissions\\_advice\\_Dec\\_2014.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/389448/Summer_born_admissions_advice_Dec_2014.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> For example, City of York (2015) Admissions Policy on Delayed and Deferred Admission to Primary School

[https://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKEwjpI rOlru7ZAhVMDMAKHXLTCI4QFggUAAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.york.gov.uk%2Fdownload%2Fdownloads%2Fid%2F9565%2Fdelayed\\_and\\_deferred\\_admission\\_to\\_reception.pdf&usg=AOvVaw0FOXxqjxYmjfktpFyVXOW\\_](https://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKEwjpI rOlru7ZAhVMDMAKHXLTCI4QFggUAAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.york.gov.uk%2Fdownload%2Fdownloads%2Fid%2F9565%2Fdelayed_and_deferred_admission_to_reception.pdf&usg=AOvVaw0FOXxqjxYmjfktpFyVXOW_)

<sup>15</sup>

[https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/School%20Admissions%20Briefing\\_0.pdf](https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/School%20Admissions%20Briefing_0.pdf) (p.7)

An Academy or a Free School	The Academy Trust
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The way deferments are managed may vary from authority to authority, though most appear to follow a similar system, taking into account the three main categories of children that may want to enter school into a group with a different chronological age: summer-born children, children who are perceived as gifted (and thus want to jump to a higher age group), and children whose parents/caregivers have concerns about their health.

Admission authorities must make deferment decisions based on the best interests of the child concerned and do so on a case-by-case basis – indeed this applies to each application to defer, regardless of reasons or motivations.

Among other things, the admissions authority takes into consideration:

1. The parent's views.
2. Information about the child's academic, social and emotional development.
3. Their medical history and the views of a medical professional (if relevant).
4. Whether they have previously been educated out of their normal age group, and whether they may naturally have fallen into a lower age group if it were not for being born prematurely.
5. The views of the head teacher of the school concerned.

Reasons for decisions taken on requests to delay school entry should be fully outlined to parents and parents have a statutory right to appeal a refusal of a school place for which they have applied. However, if the child is offered a place at school but it is not within the preferred age group, this right does not apply.

As individual admission authorities manage the deferment process, overall data for England on the number of children seeking or availing of delayed school entry is unavailable.

The following sections will review the processes around different categories of deferrals. For the purpose of this review procedures around a child jumping forward in age have not been considered in-depth.

### **Funding for early years / pre-schooling**

All children in England are entitled to funding of early education or childcare amounting to fifteen hours over thirty-eight weeks. This funding is available for the term after the child's third birthday. This can be extended to thirty hours where the child lives with the parents, the parents are in employment and are

not earning over Stg.100,000 per annum. Some two year olds, particularly from disadvantaged areas, may be eligible for an additional fifteen hours of childcare (early year's pupil premium).

The fifteen hours early education can be adjusted at the parent's discretion, for example, to take course over a longer period of time with less hours each week.<sup>16</sup>

Where the parents choose to defer their child's entry to school, the child remains entitled to a funded early education place until they are admitted to school. However, the government do not provide additional funding for the extra year in pre-school, (that is, above and beyond the fifteen hours, thirty hours, and/or funding from two years old if eligible). The usual funding is available until the child begins primary school, even if the start is delayed.

### **Reasons for deferring**

#### **Summer-born children**

Summer-born children are defined as those born between the 1<sup>st</sup> of April and the 31<sup>st</sup> of August and they are not required to enter Reception (year one of primary school) until a full year after the point at which they could have been first admitted. The child cannot be deferred past the compulsory school starting age.

If a parent feels that their child is not ready to start school, they can request a delayed start from the admission authority. The authority makes a decision on a case-by-case basis (that is, it is not an automatic deferral) though the Department for Education note that summer-born requests differ from any other parental requests and are being made purely on the basis of the time of birth.<sup>17</sup> In the case of children born prematurely, their due date may be taken into account, in terms of the age group a child would have fallen into if born on time.

#### **Children with special education needs**

In the case of a child with (perceived) special need or a child with disabilities, there are two sub-categories which warrant attention - children with and without an Education, Health and Care plan.

#### **Children without an Education, Health and Care Plan**

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/help-with-childcare-costs/free-childcare-and-education-for-2-to-4-year-olds>

<sup>17</sup>

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/389448/Summer\\_born\\_admissions\\_advice\\_Dec\\_2014.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/389448/Summer_born_admissions_advice_Dec_2014.pdf)

Parents requesting delayed school entry to Reception will follow the channels outlined in the admissions policy, usually the same channels as summer-born child requests though they may provide supporting evidence for their application if they wish.

Decisions are made in accordance with the best interests of the child and the types of considerations outlined above.

### **Children with an Education, Health and Care Plan**

Parents of children or schools/colleges who believe a child may require more support than is usually available in a mainstream setting can make a request to the local authority for the child to have an **Education, Health and Care** (needs assessment). This will generally have followed considerable planning and consultation between the parents and early years provider regarding the child's needs and/or school transition.

The local authority must undertake an assessment if they believe special education provisions may be necessary in accordance with an **Education, Health and Care Plan**.<sup>18</sup> In particular, they will consider the progress made by the child following the initial education planning and provisions that have already taken place in the early years setting. They will look for:

- Evidence of developmental milestones (with younger children)
- Further information on the context, nature and extent of the child's special education needs
- Whether the progress made by the child has only been achieved after high levels of intervention and support (that is, above and beyond what would normally be available)
- Evidence from clinicians and other health professionals regarding the child's physical, social and emotional development and needs, and/or

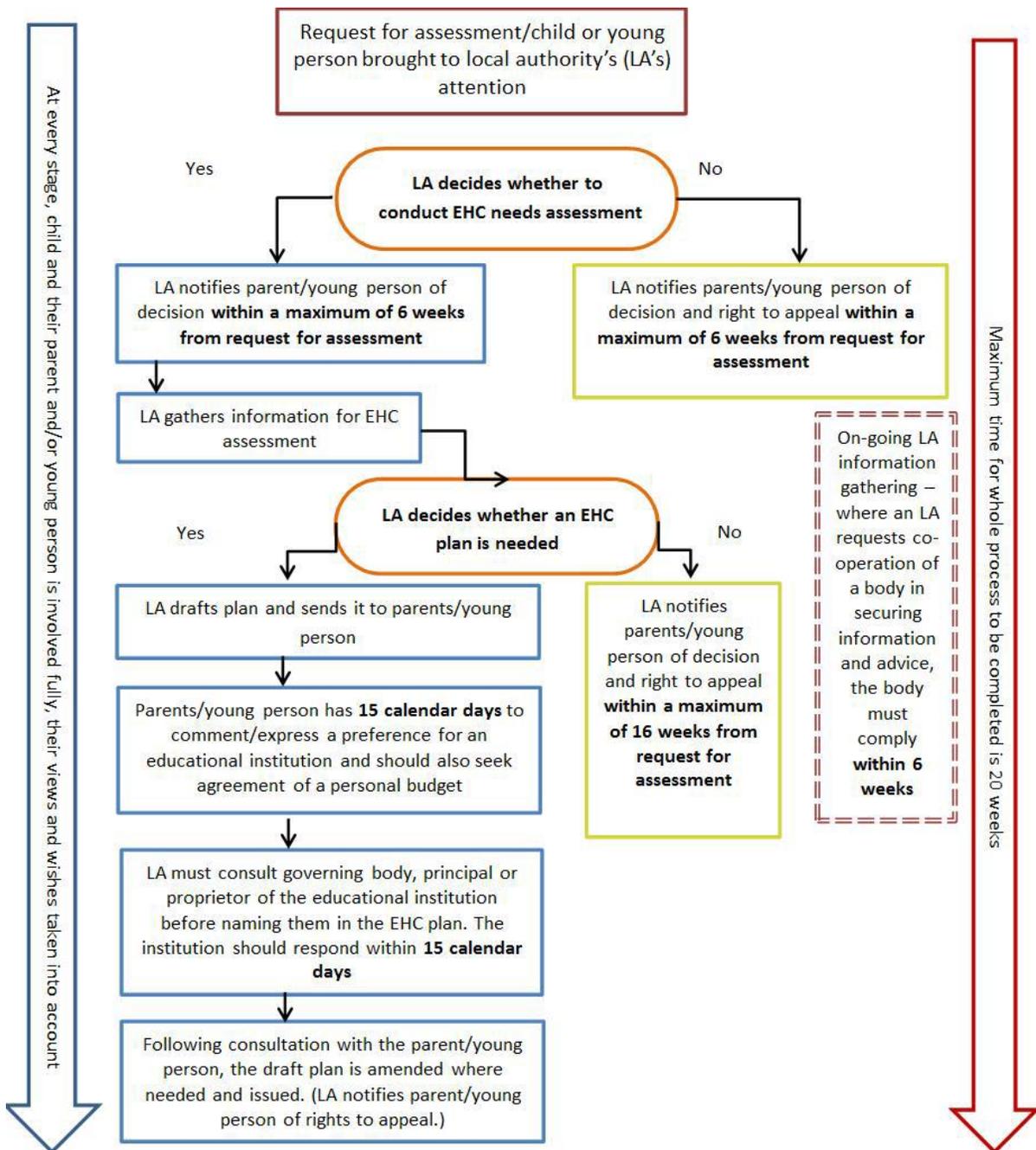
Whether the child's needs will increase with age (for instance, in the case of acquired needs through illness or accident)

Following the assessment, a child may be given an **Education Health and Care Plan** though the local authority can likewise decide not to issue an **Education Health and Care Plan** (see Figure2). The plan is a legal document outlining the education, health and care needs of the child and focusses on outcomes that reflect a child's aspirations and future goals.

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<sup>18</sup>

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/398815/SEND\\_Code\\_of\\_Practice\\_January\\_2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf)



**Figure 2 Statutory timescales for Education Health and Care Plan needs assessment and Education Health and Care Plan development<sup>19</sup>**

<sup>19</sup>

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/398815/SEND\\_Code\\_of\\_Practice\\_January\\_2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf) (p.153)

The admission authority is responsible for arranging school admission for children with an **Education Health and Care Plan**, whether they are to be schooled in the mainstream or specialist environment. However, children with an **Education Health and Care Plan** are subject to different admission processes and many general admission policies advise parents to liaise directly with the Special Education Needs (SEN) teams in the authority regarding school places, that is, as opposed to providing policies outlining the procedures for admission. One example of a specific policy is the Surrey Admission Authority guidance document **Admission to school for children with an Education Health and Care Plan or a Statement of Special Educational Needs**<sup>20</sup>.

The **Education Health and Care Plan** requires a parent to note their school preference for the child, as provided for in Sections 33 and 39 of the **Children and Families Act 2014**. This includes any maintained school (mainstream or specialised) as well as non-maintained special school. The local authority must comply with the parents' school request unless the setting would be unsuitable for the age, ability, aptitude or needs of the child, or if the child's attendance in that setting would be incompatible with the efficient education of others, or the efficient use of resources<sup>21</sup>.

To establish the appropriateness of proceeding with the parent's preference, the local authority will consult school authorities (for example, governing body, principal) and will also seek agreement relating to any provisions which may be delivered on site and secured through direct payments. Should a decision be made that the preferred setting is not appropriate, the local authority must also ascertain if reasonable steps could be taken to remove the incompatibility.

It would appear that the time taken for **Education Health and Care** assessment and planning may, in some areas, delay the point of school entry past the compulsory school age and in such a case, the right of the child to begin school at the usual age is restated (that is, the onus appears to be with the local

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<sup>20</sup> [https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/100111/15122016-SEND-admissions-guidance-2017\\_v1.1.pdf](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/100111/15122016-SEND-admissions-guidance-2017_v1.1.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Efficiency refers to the ability to provide suitable and appropriate education to children on the basis of age, ability, aptitude and SEN. 'Others' refers to children also present in the setting who will have day-to-day contact with the child with the EHC  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/398815/SEND\\_Code\\_of\\_Practice\\_January\\_2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf) (Article 9.79)

authority to ensure a smooth process of admission within the compulsory school timeframe).<sup>22</sup>

## Scotland

### Compulsory school age

The compulsory school age is outlined in Section 31 of the **Education (Scotland) Act 1980**. Children must begin school by five and are not required to remain past the age of 16. Children who have turned five before the start of the school year in mid-August are generally expected to enter P1 (first year of primary school) however, parents have a choice to send or retain their child if they are below five at the start of term. Parents can request a school place for children below the school age and decisions are made by the education authorities (Councils) on a case-by-case basis.

The vast majority (91%) of children starting primary school are aged between 4.5-5.5 years old on entry<sup>23</sup>

### Legal frameworks and policy

The **Education (Scotland) Act 1980**, Part I, Section 1 requires education authorities to “secure that there is made for their area adequate and efficient provision of school education and further education”.<sup>24</sup> In practical terms, local Councils manage the educational infrastructure, similar to how admissions authorities might manage admission to schools under their remit.

Along with the **1980 Act**, the **Education (School and Placing Information) (Scotland) Regulations 2012**<sup>25</sup> specifies that education authorities must make basic information available to parents on the placing arrangements for each

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<sup>22</sup> London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Children’s Services (2016) Guidance on ensuring children with an EHC Plan or SEN Statement receive suitable education  
<http://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=6&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewj27PrsxeVZAhVTFMAKHfqQAAtkQFghLMAU&url=http%3A%2F%2Fnewsite.bardag-lscb.co.uk%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2016%2F12%2FEnsuring-Children-with-EHC-Plans-or-SEN-Statements-receive-suitable-education.docx&usg=AOvVaw2hJajl8yCDyt0wf7eMTDL8>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2012/05/7940/4>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1980/44/section/1>

<sup>25</sup> These Acts are also influenced by, and influence in turn, the Education (Additional Support for Learning)

(Scotland) Act 2004 which will be discussed more below.

school in its catchment area. Of particular note, this basic information should include:

- The commencement arrangements for these schools
- Information on transitions (for example, from early years setting to primary school)
- The general policy or practice in relation to provision in primary or secondary schools for pupils with additional support needs
- Information on special schools (these may not be under the management of the authority, though should a placement at one of these schools be requested and be appropriate, the authority has a duty to facilitate the placement)

The Councils publish information for parents annually outlining school arrangements in their area. Decisions on discretionary deferral requests are made on a case-by-case basis, generally taking into account the child's emotional, social and educational development (for example, the child's approach to learning and ability to communicate needs).<sup>26</sup> Councils note that in exceptional cases, a deferral may be an appropriate intervention for a child with significant support needs. There is also a provision for automatic deferral (discussed below in Reasons for Deferring – Month of Birth).

Deferral requests can generally be made in respect of a child who is five after the start of the school year.<sup>27</sup> These requests are made by parents to the local council. As per the **Education (Scotland) Act 1980** a child cannot be granted a deferment automatically where they would turn six in the additional year.

Different councils appear to have slightly different processes for handling deferrals. For example, the Highland Council insist on the input of an Educational Psychologist to advise on the appropriateness of any deferment which would result in the child being aged six on entry to primary school. Likewise, Midlothian Council make special reference in their deferral policy to primary school children who would turn six during this retained year in nursery, noting that a decision to

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<sup>26</sup> Midlothian Council and The Highland Council

<sup>27</sup>

[https://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0ahUKEwjPn6vM2-vZAhVHLsAKHfV6B4gQFgg0MAE&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.midlothian.gov.uk%2Fdownloads%2Fdownloads%2Fid%2F2451%2Fadmissions\\_to\\_primary\\_and\\_secondary\\_schools.pdf&usg=AOvVawI13-eCQndVLi5bfdC8Sz9p](https://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0ahUKEwjPn6vM2-vZAhVHLsAKHfV6B4gQFgg0MAE&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.midlothian.gov.uk%2Fdownloads%2Fdownloads%2Fid%2F2451%2Fadmissions_to_primary_and_secondary_schools.pdf&usg=AOvVawI13-eCQndVLi5bfdC8Sz9p)

defer the child would only be made in “exceptional circumstances”.<sup>28</sup> Both examples would appear to suggest some flexibility in practice around the deferment of children turning six in the additional year, even above the legality of children starting primary school beyond the compulsory age.

The Midlothian Council notes the importance of the “core team around the child” agreeing along with the parents that the application to defer is in the child’s best interest. This team also complete a support plan for the additional year in Early Learning and Childcare to accompany the deferral application.

## **Reasons for deferring**

### **Month of birth**

Similar to England, the month of the child’s birth is influential in the deferral process. Children in Scotland born with birthdays in January and February may defer their child’s primary school entry and are entitled to an additional year in the early years setting. This deferral can be granted automatically (though through the usual application channels) for children born in these months.

However, those whose birthdays fall in the September to December period are not entitled to the extra year in the early years setting. Nor is this deferral automatic.

### **The Growing Up in Scotland Early Experiences of Primary School**

longitudinal study tracked up to 14,000 children across their early years, childhood and beyond. The study looked at instances of deferral, reporting that 13% of children defer entry to primary school among three cohorts of children born at different times. Among the child cohort (3,000 children born between June 2002 and May 2003), the proportion of automatic and discretionary deferrals was 69% and 31%, respectively.

Analysis was undertaken within the sub-sample of children in the birth cohort (two sets of children: 5,000 born between June 2004 and May 2005; and, 6,000 born between March 2010 and February 2011). It was noted that there were no differences in the overall likelihood of deferred entry by a family’s socio-economic status. However, where a child’s entry to school had been deferred,

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<https://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewjh0NeB4v3ZAhWDKcAKHeP6C44QFggUAAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.midlothian.gov.uk%2Fdownload%2Fdownloads%2Fid%2F950%2Fadmissions%20to%20early%20learning%20and%20childcare.pdf&usg=AOvVaw0IKJQFNIGhjrI4R60JehTt>

that entry was significantly more likely to have been discretionary than automatic amongst children in more disadvantaged circumstances.<sup>29</sup>

The study also looked at the reasons for deferring among the child cohort and noted that parents of lower-income groups were more often advised to defer (Table 30).

**Table 30 Reasons given for deferring child's school entry by deferral type and household income - Child cohort<sup>30</sup>**

Reason	Deferral type		Equivalised income group	
	Automatic (%)	Discretionary (%)	In bottom 3 quintiles (%)	In top 2 quintiles (%)
<b>Not ready</b>	50	29	39	48
<b>Not old enough</b>	35	25	31	37
<b>Chose not to send</b>	5	7	4	10
<b>Advised to defer</b>	5	5	8	1
<b>Health or developmental issues</b>	4	19	12	3
<b>Something else</b>	1	14	7	1
<b>Bases</b>				
<b>Weighted</b>	135	55	107	66
<b>Unweighted</b>	147	56	106	78

### Children with special education needs

The **Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004<sup>31</sup>** makes “provision for additional support in connection with the school education of children and young persons having additional support needs; and for connected purposes”.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2012/05/7940/4>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2012/05/7940/4>

<sup>31</sup> [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2004/4/pdfs/asp\\_20040004\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2004/4/pdfs/asp_20040004_en.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2004/4/pdfs/asp\\_20040004\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2004/4/pdfs/asp_20040004_en.pdf) (p.1)

For the purposes of the Act, ‘additional support needs’ relate to a child who would have difficulty benefitting from (or being provided with) school education without additional support. Additional support might describe educational provision that is additional or different to that which is generally provided to children, or that might be generally provided to children of the same age in schools which are managed by the education authority.

The Act refers to Co-ordinated Support Plans – a plan that is required for the provision of additional support. It includes what the child’s needs are, some background on the factor(s) leading to these needs, the educational objectives for the child, and who will provide the additional support. The education authorities must devise a plan where:

- An education authority is responsible for the school education of the child
- The child has additional support needs arising from one or more complex factors (for example, factors that would have a significant adverse effect on schooling), or multiple factors (factors which alone may not be complex but taken together have an adverse effect on schooling)
- The child’s needs are likely to continue for longer than a year; and
- The needs will require significant additional support to be provided, whether by the education authority themselves or other appropriate agencies

Section 6 of the Act makes a distinction between children who have additional needs, and children who have additional needs *and* require a co-ordinated support plan. Schedule 2 of the Act provides for school placements though no reference is made to deferrals.

Reviewing the Councils’ information on school entry and deferral, it does not appear to be the case that children with a co-ordinated care plan are treated appreciably differently to other children (for example, as is the case in England where children with an **Education Health and Care Plan** are subject to different admissions procedures). The Councils have specific guidance relating to their obligations to children with co-ordinated care plans<sup>33</sup> though it does not appear to affect the deferral application process (or decisions) for parents.

The Highland Council note that when a deferral is agreed by parents and the child’s core team as an appropriate intervention, it should be noted on the child’s plan. Clear targets should also be put into the plan and worked on during the additional year.

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<sup>33</sup> [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2004/4/pdfs/asp\\_20040004\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2004/4/pdfs/asp_20040004_en.pdf)

North Lanarkshire Council invite parents and child to attend a meeting at the child's nursery when they have put in a request to defer on the basis of additional needs. The meeting is also attended by a specialist in early education with the purpose of determining whether or not the child "has reached a level of development which will allow him/her to settle happily into a primary one class".<sup>34</sup> Deferral applications for children with co-ordinated care plans are applied for using the same form and parents are advised to supply a copy of the plan as supporting documentation. However, it is unlikely that a child with a plan will be subject to further assessment in relation to the application.

## **Jurisdictions without defined systems for deferring**

### **Northern Ireland**

Northern Ireland has the lowest compulsory school age of all European countries, having been reduced from five to four in 1989.<sup>35,36</sup> Where a child's birthday falls during the summer months (2<sup>nd</sup> of July – 31<sup>st</sup> of August), the child must begin school by the September following their fifth birthday.

There is no current system for deferring school entry, nor can a child remain in the pre-school setting for an extra year.<sup>37</sup> At present, where parents have any concerns about their child being ready for school or having any additional needs for transitioning to primary school, they are advised to contact the school principal in the primary school they wish their child to attend.

Though there had been consultations around the deferral processes for children entering primary school in 2015, legal changes were put on hold. The results of the consultation process are available and respondents overwhelmingly supported making deferral (and implicitly, a system for same) available.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.northlanarkshire.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=3261&p=0>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/eurydice/compulsory-age-of-starting-school>

<sup>36</sup> Article 46 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/Starting%20School%20Age%20-%20A%20Guide%20for%20Parents.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/summary-of-consultation-on-proposals-to-introduce-deferral-of-compulsory-school-starting-age-in-exceptional-circumstances.pdf>

## **New Zealand**

All children must be enrolled in primary school before the age of six however recent updates to the legislation (**The Education (Update) Amendment Act 2017**) have expanded on compulsory school age.<sup>39</sup>

The introduction of ‘cohort entry’ from 2018 allows groups of children to enter primary school at the beginning of a term closest to their fifth birthday (rather than on their fifth birthday, and as opposed to the beginning of the year). For example, a child might start in the autumn or winter term.

There is no system to defer school entry. Early Childhood Education settings “must have an environment that is inclusive and responsive to all children” and cannot exclude a child. This is a condition of their operating license.<sup>40</sup> Parents with concerns about their child are encouraged to make contact with the early intervention service, which provides state-funded support. Alternatively, the Early Childhood Education settings may make this contact. In the case of a child with a high degree of needs, Early Childhood Education settings may take place within a special school setting.

## **Jurisdictions with varied systems for deferral**

### **United States of America**

There is considerable variation in the USA with respect to early years schooling. There are considerable differences between states’ compulsory school ages, policies around exemptions, how school readiness is judged and availability of pre-K (pre-Kindergarten, or pre-school). Given this diversity, it is not possible to review in depth arrangements in each state, however, the following sections will outline general policy at the federal level and focus on several state-based examples of the infrastructure and arrangements in more depth.

### **Compulsory school age**

Compulsory school entry age in the USA ranges from 5 years to 8 years old (See Figure 3) and many individual states have different systems for opting in to school early, or delaying entry. Babel notes that given the possibilities of early entry in some states, and late entry in others, “it is possible for a three-year old child in Connecticut and an eight-year old child in either Pennsylvania or Washington to

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.education.govt.nz/ministry-of-education/legislation/the-education-update-amendment-act/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://parents.education.govt.nz/learning-support/early-learning-support/choosing-an-early-childhood-education-service-that-offers-support-for-special-education-needs/>

be in Kindergarten at the same time” despite “monumental” differences in these children’s developmental stage (2017, p.30).<sup>41</sup>

Along with significant age differences, the school entry point also varies widely. For instance, the Education Commission for States reported in February 2018 that only three states (Washington, Vermont and Florida – along with Washington D.C.) provide universal pre-K, with another seven providing mostly-universal pre-K, meaning that almost all districts in these states make provision for this. Universal pre-K is “not capped by funding amounts, enrolment numbers or enrolment deadlines”.<sup>42</sup>

A further 35 states provide non-universal, but state-funded pre-K places while five states provide no state funded pre-K at all (Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, North Dakota and South Dakota).<sup>43</sup>

At the next level up, Kindergarten is not compulsory in 33 states and as a result children can enter school into the first grade (Grade 1)<sup>44</sup>

Again, the sheer diversity is difficult to contend with. Where pre-K is unavailable, Kindergarten could plausibly be viewed as the pre-school setting. In areas with pre-K, Kindergarten might be assumed to be the first year of primary school. In still more states, where a child has not had access, or been required, to attend pre-K or Kindergarten, the first year of any schooling might be Grade 1. In addition, the curriculum in many kindergartens is less play-based and more academically focussed to prepare the child for their academic career. This has led to kindergarten being known to many as “the next first grade”.<sup>45</sup>

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[https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c8d9/8886a1c4b5f1fee431290302f2c85dd10900.pdf?\\_ga=2.19668472.1333798579.1521719892-1330621690.1521719892](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c8d9/8886a1c4b5f1fee431290302f2c85dd10900.pdf?_ga=2.19668472.1333798579.1521719892-1330621690.1521719892)

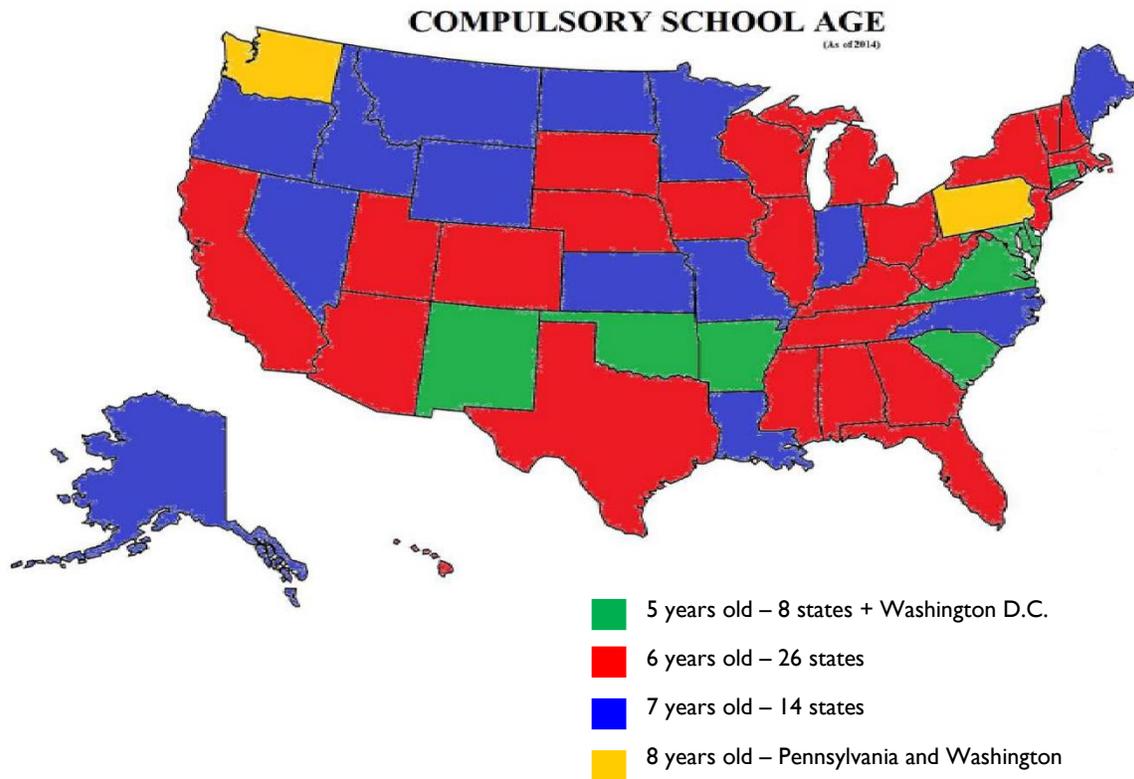
42 [https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/How-States-Fund-Pre-K\\_A-Primer-for-Policymakers.pdf](https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/How-States-Fund-Pre-K_A-Primer-for-Policymakers.pdf) (p.5)

43 [https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/How-States-Fund-Pre-K\\_A-Primer-for-Policymakers.pdf](https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/How-States-Fund-Pre-K_A-Primer-for-Policymakers.pdf)

44 There are further two states where Kindergarten is not compulsory but comes with caveats: in New Jersey Abbotts Districts require children to attend full-day Kindergarten; and, in North Carolina an “exceptionally mature child” can enter school in Grade 1 at the discretion of the principal (<http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquest6RTN?Rep=KPSN14>)

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[https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c8d9/8886a1c4b5f1fee431290302f2c85dd10900.pdf?\\_ga=2.19668472.1333798579.1521719892-1330621690.1521719892](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c8d9/8886a1c4b5f1fee431290302f2c85dd10900.pdf?_ga=2.19668472.1333798579.1521719892-1330621690.1521719892) data derived from the Education Commission of the States <https://www.ecs.org/kindergarten-policies/> (p.33)



**Figure 3 Compulsory School Age 2014<sup>46</sup>**

### Legal frameworks and policy

A number of education policies introduced at the federal level have impacted on the mechanisms and culture of early childhood education. In 1993, George H. Bush (Snr.) Introduced the National Education Goals Panel, which had the target of all American children starting school ready to learn by the year 2000. One of the knock-on effects of this policy was the establishment of a set of cognitive, social, emotional and physical developmental standards for kindergarten-aged children.

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<sup>46</sup> Babel (2017, p. 26)

[https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c8d9/8886a1c4b5f1fee431290302f2c85dd10900.pdf?\\_ga=2.19668472.1333798579.1521719892-1330621690.1521719892](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c8d9/8886a1c4b5f1fee431290302f2c85dd10900.pdf?_ga=2.19668472.1333798579.1521719892-1330621690.1521719892) data derived from the Education Commission of the States <https://www.ecs.org/kindergarten-policies/>

The goals of the panel were not achieved by 2000 and George W. Bush (Jnr.) introduced the **No Child Left Behind Act**. This supported standards-based testing and made schools accountable for their performance - high-performing schools would be rewarded, often financially, while low-performing schools would be held accountable for their poor performance, often resulting in a decrease or withdrawal of funding.

Barack Obama introduced the **Every Student Succeeds Act** in 2015, which placed the power back into the state government's hands with respect to standards and accountability, including student testing.<sup>47</sup>

The policy landscape has influenced in particular the notion of school 'readiness' as well as increasing the standards expected of kindergarten aged children (and subsequently, pre-school aged children). There have been concerted efforts in many states to improve and expand access and funding for pre-school (pre-K) and transitional programmes, for instance, the State-wide Voluntary Pre-school Programme in Iowa.

Simultaneously, curricula have moved away from traditional play-based activities and towards more academic pursuits, including a focus on literacy at Kindergarten level. The Education Commission for the States notes that 33 states along with Washington D.C. have implemented Kindergarten readiness assessments.

These tests purport to identify students who may require additional education needs, inform teachers' development of appropriate supports for each learner, and determine how pre-K initiatives are performing at readying the child for learning<sup>48</sup>. Babel (2017) notes that these assessments can also be used to deny children entry to Kindergarten and justify the de-funding of pre-school programmes.

What is unusual about the USA is that the concept of a child being 'ready' to begin primary school is a fixed and quantifiable standard and this differs with other jurisdictions.

Educational provisions for children with disabilities are made in the federal policy **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**. The Act provides that

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<sup>47</sup> Babel (2017, p. 26)

[https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c8d9/8886a1c4b5f1fee431290302f2c85dd10900.pdf?\\_ga=2.19668472.1333798579.1521719892-1330621690.1521719892](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c8d9/8886a1c4b5f1fee431290302f2c85dd10900.pdf?_ga=2.19668472.1333798579.1521719892-1330621690.1521719892)

<sup>48</sup> [https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/50-State-Comparison-K-3-Quality\\_Updated-1.pdf](https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/50-State-Comparison-K-3-Quality_Updated-1.pdf)

children with disabilities will receive equal opportunities to access state-funded education that fits their needs.

The Act details that any child with special education needs should be assessed and an **Individualized Education Plan** devised in collaboration with the child's parents, school, education administration officials and other relevant professionals. An Individualized Education Plan is a statement of the child's performance levels, educational goals, school placement and details of specific services required. The **Individualized Education Plan** addresses aspects of the general curriculum that are affected by the child's disability only.<sup>49</sup> The Act also has a presumption of mainstreaming within the 'least restrictive environment'.

Given the diversity across the United States of America, the following provides brief illustrations of education practice in California, Florida and Iowa.

### **California**

Kindergarten is mandatory in California. It is compulsory for students aged six to attend and so most children begin kindergarten at five years of age. The state has provided for a fully-funded additional year at Kindergarten, should the parents choose. This is known as Transitional Kindergarten and is the first year of a two-year programme (the second being the traditional Kindergarten year).

This provision was put in place primarily to assist students whose fifth birthday falls between September and December in a given year. Parents can opt to enrol their child on this two-year programme and once enrolled, the child cannot exit into Grade 1 after one year. Essentially, the transitional kindergarten is seen as an extra year before, rather than a retained year after.

However should the parents and school agree that a child would benefit from an extra year in Kindergarten (where the child is enrolled on the one-year Kindergarten track), the child can be retained for one extra year only.<sup>50</sup> Children with an **Individualized Education Plan** can be retained but the **Individualized Education Plan** may need to be revised to take into account the exemption and subsequent learning goals for the extra year.<sup>51</sup> Funding for the extra year is agreed at the district / local level.

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<sup>49</sup> <https://www.disabilityrightsca.org/system/files?file=file-attachments/504001Ch04.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/em/kindergartenfaq.asp>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/sr/promoretntn.asp>

At the state level, California has no requirement for children to be ‘readiness’ tested entering kindergarten.

### **Florida**

Florida offers free pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) on a voluntary basis to all children who are four years old on or before the 1<sup>st</sup> of September in a given year. Parents whose children turn four between the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February and the 1<sup>st</sup> of September may opt to defer their child’s entry until the following year.<sup>52</sup>

Children entering Kindergarten must be assessed for readiness within thirty days of beginning the year. Partly, these assessments assist in identifying students who may benefit from additional interventions and support. The screening also incorporates “mechanisms for recognizing potential variations in kindergarten readiness rates for students with disabilities”.<sup>53</sup>

For children with a disability as evidenced by an Individualized Education Plan in place, they are eligible for pre-Kindergarten Specialized Instructional Services. This is pre-Kindergarten delivered in a specialist setting and offers a range of additional therapeutic services, for instance, speech and language therapy. These services are funded but due to the higher cost of delivery, it is noted that children attending may receive less hours in education compared to traditional pre-Kindergarten settings.<sup>54</sup>

In transitioning from pre-Kindergarten to Kindergarten, the Florida Department for Education note that parents may be hesitant about sending a child to Kindergarten at the usual age and resources offered to parents stress the importance of planning for transitions. In particular, meetings between the parents, child, new teacher and school administrator, are recommended to assist in the transition process.<sup>55</sup>

Florida does not have a statutory provision for age exemptions or waivers and so decisions around deferred school entry take place at the local level.

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<sup>52</sup> <http://www.floridaearlylearning.com/vpk.aspx>

<sup>53</sup> [http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm?App\\_mode=Display\\_Statute&Search\\_String=&URL=1000-1099/1002/Sections/1002.69.html](http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=&URL=1000-1099/1002/Sections/1002.69.html)

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.floridaearlylearning.com/sites/www/Uploads/files/Oel%20Resources/2015%20VPK%20SIS%20Fact%20Sheet%205.12.15.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/paving-way-kindergarten-young-children-disabilities>

## **Appendix 3 – International evidence on the retention of children in early childhood settings**

### **Scope of the literature review**

Evidence on the effects of delayed school entry from the literature are reviewed in this document from the perspective of ‘redshirting’ and grade retention. The review sought evidence to support or refute the notion that delayed school entry helps the child’s socialising / developmental skills to ‘catch-up’.

Where possible, the studies reviewed looked specifically at the effects as they relate to children with disabilities. However, research which disaggregates for this population, is not bountiful.

Of particular interest were studies of delayed school entry which show the:

- Educational, social or cognitive effects
- Short - medium- and longer-term effects, and
- Effects related to differentials in chronological age with counterparts

### **Issues in reviewing the evidence**

It is very difficult to isolate the variables required to analyse the effects of delayed school entry relevant to the Irish context of overage exemptions for children with disabilities. To begin, there is limited research on the effects of delayed school entry and retention for children with disabilities. More recently, attention has been given to the practice of ‘redshirting’<sup>56</sup> and the effects this has on children with disabilities<sup>57</sup> but the context is difficult to match with the educational landscape in Ireland.

There are distinctions between children who are delayed from entering any formal education setting, and children who are delayed entering primary school but retained in a pre-school setting for an extra year. There are also differences between children who are retained for a second year in the pre-school setting where explicit targets are worked towards in the extra year (for example, educational, social, emotional, behavioural targets, and so on) and children who undertake a second year at pre-school without any specific direction as to the purpose or goal of this extra year, and even children who undertake a two-year

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<sup>56</sup> Delaying entry to primary school, giving an extra year for the child to mature.

<sup>57</sup> Fortner and Jenkins (2017; 2018)

programme at pre-school (for example, as with some Transitional Kindergarten programmes). Much of the research has been carried out in American settings. However, different states may or may not have pre-Kindergarten educational settings so often children whose entry is delayed are kept in the home, rather than in preschool (pre-K, or pre-Kindergarten). The search for relevant studies to the Irish context has been difficult, as much of the research is not comparing like for like contextually.

In the more general studies on delayed school entry and retention in grade, the data can be confounded by the parent's decision making, (that is, selection bias); the effects of the household environment and attention to home-based learning, (for example, early literacy skills); local educational culture, (for example, where delaying entry to primary school is a more visible parental option) and social factors like socio-economic status, gender, etc. It can prove difficult to isolate the 'pure' effects of delayed school entry.

This literature review is presented with these caveats in mind.

## **Early Childhood Care and Education (Early Childhood Care and Education)**

### **Ireland**

In the Irish context, early childhood refers to the time in the child's life from birth to six years.<sup>58</sup> UNESCO provide classification of education programmes through the **International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)** and children in the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme participate in programmes at the **International Standard Classification of Education Level 0**.

Ring et al.<sup>59</sup> (2016) outline two categories of programmes at this level:

1. Early childhood educational development programmes which include appropriate educational content for children from birth to three years.
2. Pre-primary education programmes, which have an emphasis on social skills and interaction with peers and educators, cognitive skills (like logic and reasoning), early literacy skills (alphabet and mathematical concepts),

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<https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/earlyyears/20170118AnExaminationOfConceptsOfSchoolReadinessAmongParentsEducatorsIreland.PDF>

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<https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/earlyyears/20170118AnExaminationOfConceptsOfSchoolReadinessAmongParentsEducatorsIreland.PDF>

exploration of the environment and gross motor development. This second category is designed for children from the age of three to the commencement of primary school.

The introduction of the free pre-school year in Ireland in 2010 provides for the universal pre-primary education and care to children in Ireland and is to be extended to two free pre-school years from September 2018<sup>60</sup>.

### **Compulsory school age**

Children are eligible to attend pre-school on reaching 3 years of age (2 years 8 months from September 2018) and can continue in **Early Childhood Care and Education** until they begin primary school, provided they are not more than 5 years 6 months at the end of the pre-school year. The compulsory age of primary school attendance in Ireland is 6 years old. Children with special needs have been able to apply for an overage exemption, beyond the upper age eligibility for **Early Childhood Care and Education**. These applications have been made through the local Childcare Committees and included

“A detailed assessment report from the HSE or Consultant or a letter from the Principal of the school stating the school’s policy re age starting school.”<sup>61</sup>

### **Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)**

In June 2016, **AIM** was introduced to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Early Childhood Care and Education programme. The model works on seven levels of progressive support (Figure 4).<sup>62</sup>

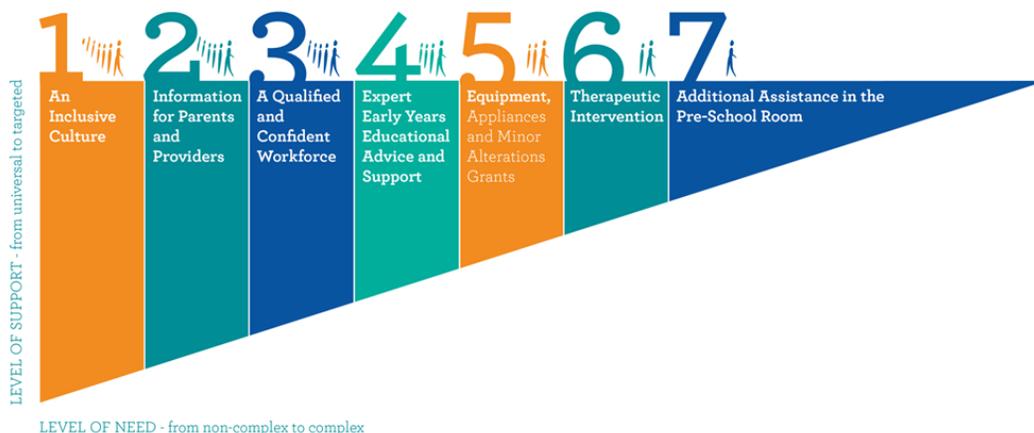
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<sup>60</sup> <http://aim.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ecce-eligibility.pdf>

<sup>61</sup> [https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/childcare/eccesept2012/ECCE\\_Service\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/childcare/eccesept2012/ECCE_Service_Guide.pdf)

<sup>62</sup> <http://aim.gov.ie/>

A Model to Support Access to the ECCE Programme for Children with a Disability



**Figure 4 AIM Supports Level 1-7**

Levels 1 to 3 encompass universal supports, focussed on fostering inclusivity and quality in the **Early Childhood Care and Education** sector and benefit all children. Levels 4 to 7 encompass more targeted supports for children with special needs which parents and/or **Early Childhood Care and Education** providers can apply for. Children with and without diagnoses can access these supports. They include:

- Expert advice, mentoring and support from Early Years Specialists
- Grants to provide for accommodations like equipment and minor building alterations
- Therapy services (provided through **AIM** and delivered through the HSE); and, where these supports are not sufficient to meet the needs of the child or Early Childhood Care and Education provider to allow a child to attend,
- Additional capitation to fund classroom supports, or to enable a reduction in the child to staff ratio.<sup>63</sup>

### **Curriculum in early childhood**

The introduction of free pre-school years speaks to the growing recognition that this period in a child's life is a critical period of development. Most research has highlighted positive short and longer time impacts. In the short term, pre-school

<sup>63</sup> <http://aim.gov.ie/for-parents/>

education is viewed as fostering key social, cognitive, motor skills and so on. In the long term, early childhood education has been shown to improve education and employment outcomes, reduce poverty and social exclusion, and lower criminality.<sup>646566</sup>

There is no set curriculum for the **Early Childhood Care and Education** in Ireland, though there are policies relevant to the pedagogical approach. **Siolta** is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. It emphasises quality in the **Early Childhood Care and Education** setting, for instance in relation to standards, principles, staff development and components of quality.<sup>67</sup> Any **Early Childhood Care and Education** setting that offers free pre-school years must adhere to the principles of **Siolta** (Figure 5).

**Aistear** is the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and focusses on learning environments, practical resources for developing instruction and learning opportunities, fostering optimal learning environments and facilitating children to become competent, confident learners. **Aistear** outlines four main themes (Figure 6) around which curricula in the **Early Childhood Care and Education** settings should be developed, rather than taking a prescriptive approach.

In addition to the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme, the curricula at Junior and Senior Infants follows the **Aistear** framework, and it is also applicable to more informal learning environments, for example, as guidance to parents.

Taken together, a Practice Guide has been devised to implement **Aistear Siolta**<sup>68</sup> with a view to developing an

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<sup>64</sup> [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1667.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1667.html)

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9578996>

<sup>66</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/582008/EPRS\\_BRI\(2016\)582008\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/582008/EPRS_BRI(2016)582008_EN.pdf)

<sup>67</sup> <http://siolta.ie/media/pdfs/siolta-manual-2017.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> <http://aistearsiolta.ie/en/About/Full-Print-Version/Full-Print-Version-of-Aistear-Siolta-Practice-Guide.pdf>

“inquiry-based curriculum that motivates, engages and appropriately challenges all children as learners and enables them to progress in their individual learning journeys” (p.12).

There is an emphasis on learning by doing, the diversity and unique characteristics of children, and the important role of adults in children’s development<sup>69</sup>. One of the pillars of the Practice Guide is supporting transitions from the Early Childhood Care and Education settings to Primary School.<sup>70</sup>

<p><b>The value of Early Childhood</b></p> <p>Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right.</p>	<p><b>Children First</b></p> <p>The child’s individuality, strengths, rights and needs are central in the provision of quality early childhood experiences.</p>	<p><b>Parents</b></p> <p>Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development.</p>
<p><b>Relationships</b></p> <p>Responsive, sensitive and reciprocal relationships, which are consistent over time, are essential to the wellbeing,</p>	<p><b>Equality</b></p> <p>Equality is an essential characteristic of quality early childhood care and education.</p>	<p><b>Diversity</b></p> <p>Quality early childhood settings acknowledge and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, personal, cultural</p>

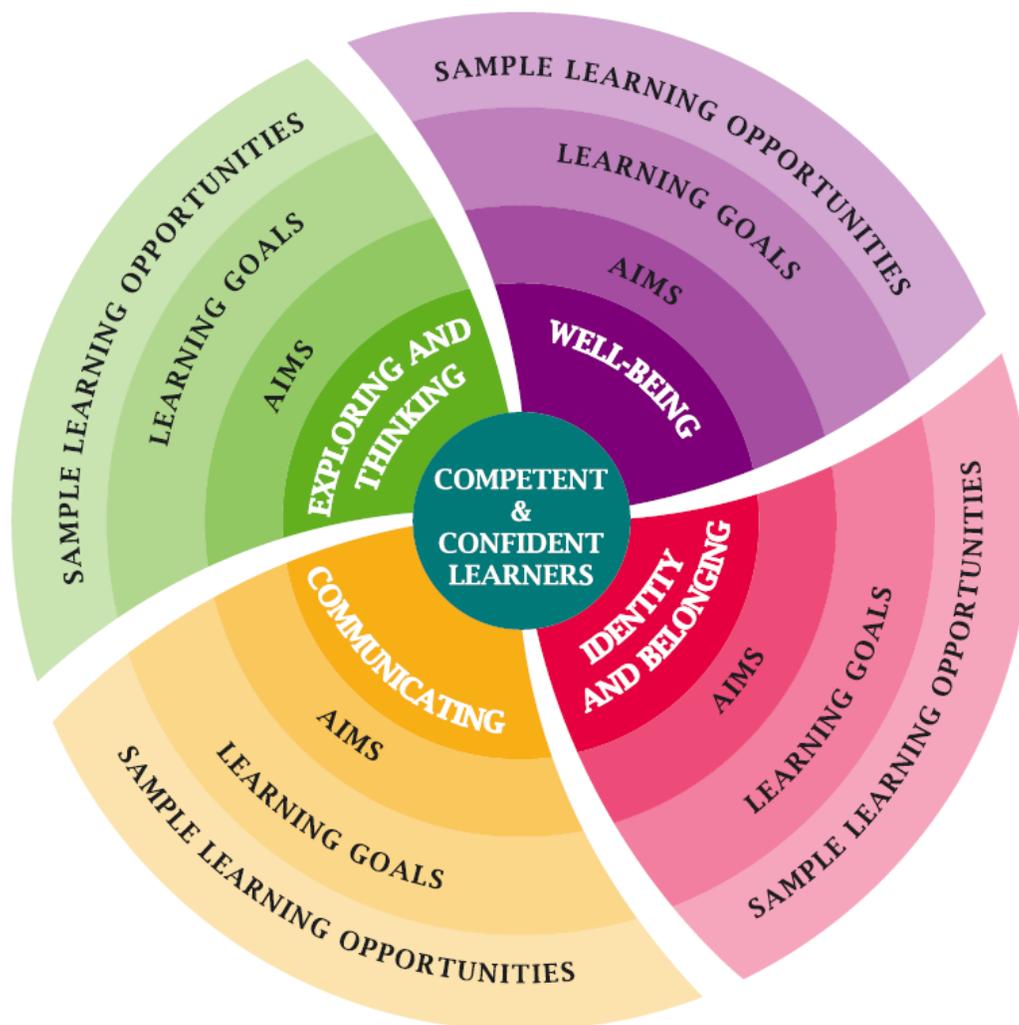
<sup>69</sup> <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Language-New-Junior-infants-2nd-class>

<sup>70</sup> <http://aistearsiolta.ie/en/Transitions/Supporting-Transitions.pdf>

learning and development of the young child.		and linguistic identity validated.
<b>Environments</b>  The physical environment of the young child has a direct impact on her/his well-being, learning and development.	<b>Welfare</b>  The safety, welfare and well-being of all children must be protected and promoted in all early childhood environments.	<b>Role of the Adult</b>  The role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental.
<b>Teamwork</b>  The provision of quality early childhood experiences requires cooperation, communication and mutual respect.	<b>Pedagogy</b>  Pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education.	<b>Play</b>  Play is central to the well-being, development and learning of the young child.

**Figure 5 Principles of Siolta<sup>71</sup>**

<sup>71</sup> <http://siolta.ie/media/pdfs/siolta-manual-2017.pdf>



**Figure 6 Key curriculum themes under Aistear<sup>72</sup>**

### Learning through play – early years curriculum

Whitebread et al. (2012)<sup>73</sup> provided a report on the importance of children’s play within the contemporary European context, highlighting that play has been a consistent and important part of cultures since the Stone Age. The types of play (physical, symbolic, pretence/sociodramatic, play with objects, and play with rules) are found across cultures however, societal attitudes as to the importance

<sup>72</sup> <http://aistearsiolta.ie/en/Aistear/Introduction-to-Aistear-Principles-and-Themes.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> [http://www.importanceofplay.eu/IMG/pdf/dr\\_david\\_whitebread\\_-\\_the\\_importance\\_of\\_play.pdf](http://www.importanceofplay.eu/IMG/pdf/dr_david_whitebread_-_the_importance_of_play.pdf)

of play vary and these attitudes affect how the child is encouraged and supported to play.

Whitebread et al. note that the “evidence for the developmental benefits of play is actually now overwhelming” (p.14). Citing Vygotsky, they discuss the importance of play for the development of language and self-regulation, and the power these skills have on future academic and socio-emotional outcomes and wellbeing.

Increasing urbanisation, over-scheduling of children’s time and parental risk-aversion has seen the shrinkage of play spaces and opportunities for children to engage in play. Early education and child care settings are important sites in this regard. Play-based curricula assist in the child’s development and learning and many educators and researchers are wary of the increasing academic demands placed in the early years, the separation of ‘learning’ and ‘play’.

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on **Early Years Learning in the European Union** in 2011. This emphasised the importance of the early childhood years for children’s development and highlighted that children have a right to rest, leisure and play.<sup>74</sup>

Traditionally, European policy on **Early Childhood Education and Care** was to facilitate the caregiver’s - usually the mother’s - (re)integration to the labour market.<sup>75</sup> As the importance of **Early Childhood Education and Care** is better understood (particularly in relation to mitigating inequality, supporting children’s development and preparing for later employability), the setting is increasingly being emphasised for its educational rather than childcare function. For disadvantaged children, including children with disabilities, quality input in **Early Childhood Education and Care** settings can lead to better outcomes later on.<sup>7677</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> [http://www.importanceofplay.eu/IMG/pdf/dr\\_david\\_whitebread\\_-\\_the\\_importance\\_of\\_play.pdf](http://www.importanceofplay.eu/IMG/pdf/dr_david_whitebread_-_the_importance_of_play.pdf)

<sup>75</sup>

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/582008/EPRS\\_BRI\(2016\)582008\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/582008/EPRS_BRI(2016)582008_EN.pdf)

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[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/582008/EPRS\\_BRI\(2016\)582008\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/582008/EPRS_BRI(2016)582008_EN.pdf)

<sup>77</sup> NDA (2013) National Disability Authority briefing paper on the impact of participation for a second year in the Early Childhood Care and Education programme by children with disabilities

Ring and O’Sullivan (2017) highlighted a difference in how parents and educators view the role of play in the early years of primary school. Where pre-school (97%) and primary school (98%) educators referred to play as a context for learning, only 4 parents in their sample (n=30) mentioned play. Instead, the parents focussed on aspects of the child’s readiness and anticipated behaviours in school such as basic self-care (for example, toileting), communication and social skills and the capacity to learn independently.

The role of **Early Childhood Care and Education** in Ireland is evolving. Where Junior and Senior Infant classes were once viewed as the play-based, preparatory beginnings of education, the growth of **Early Childhood Care and Education** places and enrolment has possibly stretched the educational continuum in Ireland.

### **The transition from pre-school to primary school for children with disabilities**

The transition from pre-school to primary school is a momentous time in a child’s life and for parents of children with disabilities, this time can bring added concerns.

Wildenger<sup>78</sup> compared the transition from pre-school to primary school (kindergarten) for typically developing children and children who were developmentally delayed. As one might expect, the families of children with developmental delays had more concerns than the families of typically developing children. These concerns appeared to peak in the spring of pre-school and decline towards the autumn of Kindergarten.

The concerns of parents tended to centre of specific capacities, such as the child following directions, getting along with the other children and teacher, basic self-care (for example, toileting) and being able to communicate their needs. Many of these reflect Ring et al.’s<sup>79</sup> general concepts of school readiness (for all children) which will be discussed in more depth later.

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<sup>78</sup>[https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=http://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewjZwtrny4rbAhVK46QKHWr0CBgQFg hBMAM&url=http%3A%2F%2Fsurface.syr.edu%2Fcgi%2Fviewcontent.cgi%3Farticle%3D1165%26context%3Dpsy\\_etd&usg=AOvVaw0HK8islymsmmSE8mb9\\_kPt&httpsredir=1&article=1165&context=psy\\_etd](https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=http://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewjZwtrny4rbAhVK46QKHWr0CBgQFg hBMAM&url=http%3A%2F%2Fsurface.syr.edu%2Fcgi%2Fviewcontent.cgi%3Farticle%3D1165%26context%3Dpsy_etd&usg=AOvVaw0HK8islymsmmSE8mb9_kPt&httpsredir=1&article=1165&context=psy_etd)

<sup>79</sup><https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/earlyyears/20170118AnExaminationOfConceptsOfSchoolReadinessAmongParentsEducatorsIreland.PDF>

Wildenger also examined pre-school and Kindergarten teachers, finding that pre-school teachers were more likely to share the parental concerns around transition. In contrast, Kindergarten teachers did not appear more concerned around the transitions of developmentally delayed children than typically developing children.

Janus et al.<sup>80</sup> examined kindergarten transition issues for children with special needs within the Canadian context and highlighted several recurring themes, most of which appear structural:

- There was a lack of ‘case management’ of the child’s records
- There was a lack of communication – parent - school and pre-school - primary school
- Pre-school funding for children’s services expired at 5 years old or commencement in primary school. This meant the transition could bring disruption of funding and services
- There was a lack of flexibility when changing from one system of supports to another
- The perceptions of educators was that transition, for children with disabilities, was not a ‘problem’

Wildenger’s themes appear to place many of the issues on the child’s readiness for school rather than whether the systems and structures of schools are ready for the child. For children with disabilities, transitions must take account the child, parents and providers.<sup>81</sup>

## Readiness for School

The concept of “readiness” is constructed in various ways and relates to paradigms of child learning and development. The maturational view takes the position that a child should be sufficiently mature / developed prior to entering the learning environment. The *interactionist* view emphasises the importance of the child’s experiences, interactions and relationships within the learning environment on their development.

Parents may take a unidirectional, maturational view of readiness, which centres on the child being equipped to handle the demands of entry to primary school *before* attending - for instance, the demands of the new setting and people,

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<sup>80</sup> <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ780817.pdf>

<sup>81</sup> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/001440299105800205>

possible differences in class size, tuition time, curriculum, etc.<sup>8283</sup> In contrast, researchers often take a bidirectional view of readiness, meaning that a child “cannot simply mature into readiness” (Foster and Jenkins, 2017, p. 45). They support the view that the challenges that primary school brings spur on the development of the child. Exposure to new experiences grows and the child, in effect, learns and matures ‘by doing’.

Ring et al.<sup>84</sup> examined concepts of school readiness among parents, pre-school educators and managers, and primary educators and principals in Ireland (Figure 7). Their research highlighted the multi-faceted nature of readiness, noting the inextricable link made between maturity and school readiness with the age of the child.

Ring et al. also found differences between pre-school educators and managers, and primary school teachers and principals as to the importance placed on pre-academic skills prior to entering primary school, for example, the importance of early literacy skills like the child recognising their own name and numbers.<sup>85</sup>

Ring et al. reported that parents and early years educators tended to view **Early Childhood Care and Education** as having an important role in preparing children academically for primary school (Figure 8). It is possible that these views influence how a child’s readiness to progress to primary is interpreted, despite the curriculum at Junior and Senior Infants being based on the same **Aistear** framework. What’s more, there is an argument that early years settings in various jurisdictions have become more academically focussed in preparing the child for primary school (for example, the debates in the USA around school readiness and Kindergarten standardised testing).<sup>86</sup> These higher standards may

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<sup>82</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308922699\\_Kindergarten\\_redshirting\\_Motivations\\_and\\_spillovers\\_using\\_census-level\\_data](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308922699_Kindergarten_redshirting_Motivations_and_spillovers_using_census-level_data)

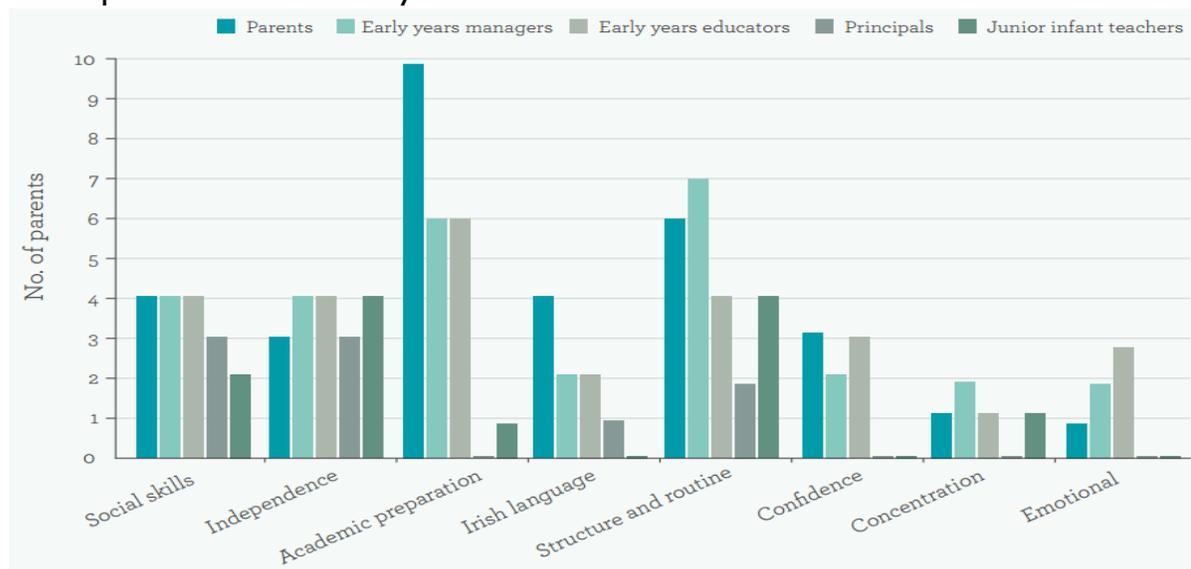
<sup>83</sup><https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/earlyyears/20170118AnExaminationOfConceptsOfSchoolReadinessAmongParentsEducatorsIreland.PDF>

<sup>84</sup><https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/earlyyears/20170118AnExaminationOfConceptsOfSchoolReadinessAmongParentsEducatorsIreland.PDF>

<sup>85</sup> Pre-school educators had a tendency to rate the importance of these skills more highly than primary school respondents.

<sup>86</sup> <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ973826>

have knock-on effects for how the primary-school readiness of children with any developmental concerns may be viewed.



**Figure 7 Stakeholders' perspectives on how pre-school prepares children for school (Ring et al., 2017, p.69)**

An aim of Ring et al.'s study was to assess the impact of the introduction of the free primary school year (FPSY) on approaches to school readiness among early years educators. Most early years educators (58.7%) indicated that FPSY did not impact on their approach to readiness. However Ring et al. included a suggestion in their report from one of the early years educators that as FPSY was designated as an educational grant, 'education-type' activities were more important than activities like crafting or baking.

Early years educator study participants viewed age as a key determinant of readiness. Participants expressed

...some concerns about the age bands for the current FPSY, noting that if a child is in the younger age band (that is. three years and two months), they may not be ready for school on completion of the FPSY and would benefit from a second year. (p.140)

Teachers' view of child development can have the greatest effect on the decision to retain a child.<sup>87</sup> Ring et al.'s report found that early years educators were more

<sup>87</sup> McCleskey and Grizzle (1992) 'Grade retention rates among students with learning disabilities', *Exceptional Children*, May Issue, pp. 548-554.

likely to discuss readiness with parents. In discussing findings on readiness in relation to children with special educational needs, they noted

- Primary schools had significantly more supports and strategies in place for students with special needs than early years settings did,
- Early years were significantly more likely than primary school respondents to report parental concerns about lack of support for children with special education needs
- Parents may be less familiar with the provision of additional supports for children with special needs in primary school
- One of the most significant concerns identified for parents around their child starting primary school is the availability of supports for children with special educational / health issues

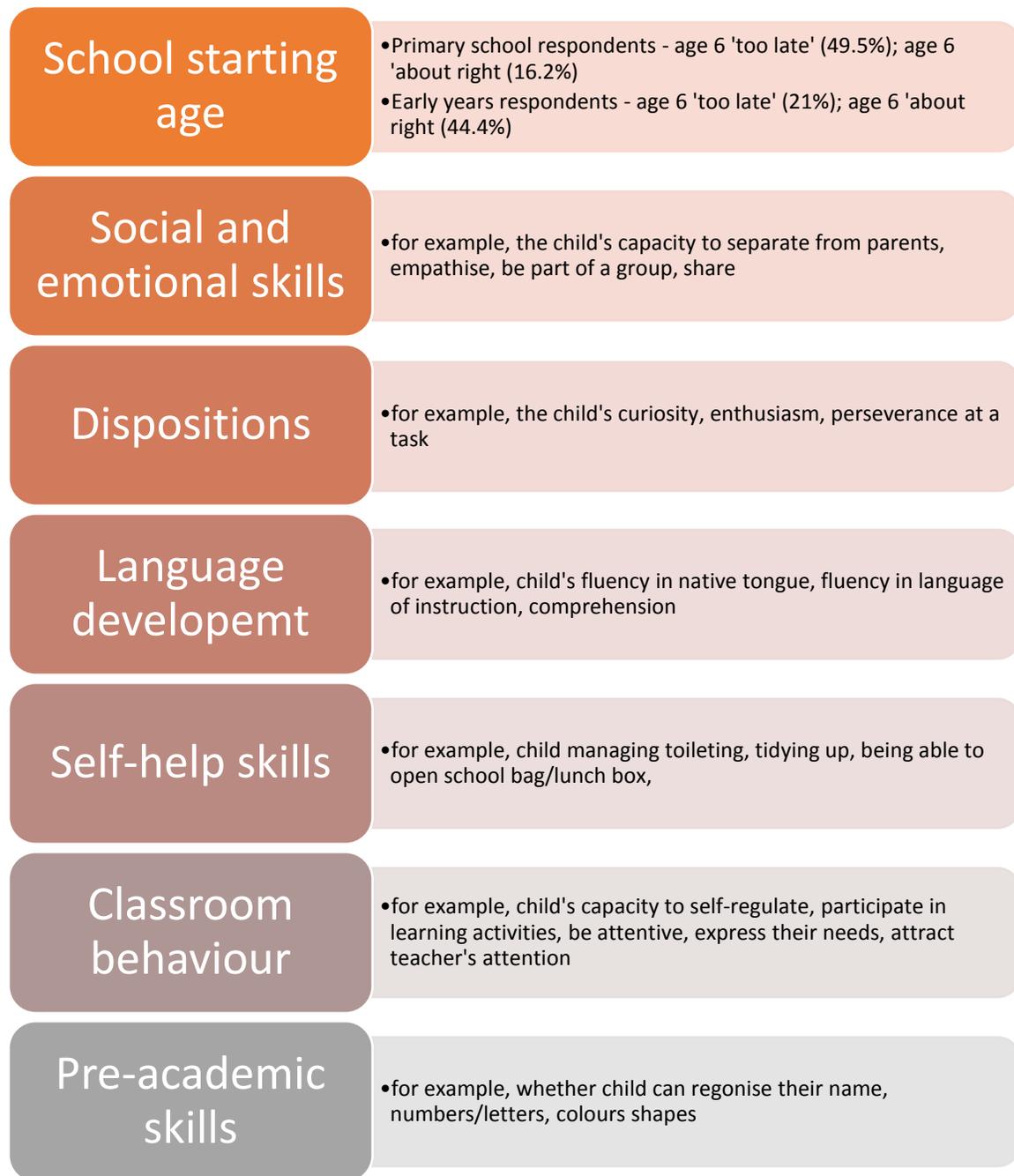
Much of the literature on readiness originates in the USA where readiness is often a quantifiable category. As of 2014, 26 states were testing children using standardised screening and assessment programmes that evaluate their social, cognitive, educational, physical and/or emotional performance for their age<sup>88</sup>. In other instances, the child's readiness can be ascribed by a parental (or professional) felt-sense of how they will get on in the new environment, and can be seen anecdotally across multiple parenting blogs.<sup>8990</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestRT?rep=KqI407>

<sup>89</sup> <http://www.alittlelondoner.com/making-big-decisions-as-parents-is-our-child-ready-for-school/#.Ws4k4FWnHGg>

<sup>90</sup> <https://herviewfromhome.com/do-i-send-my-child-to-kindergarten-or-wait-one-more-year/>



**Figure 8 Key school readiness indicators found in Ring et al. study (2016)**

### The 'unready' child

The maturational perspective views development as biological and time-bound, with school readiness deficits lying with the child rather than the school

environment.<sup>91</sup> As a result, many of the practices and interventions to manage readiness, or ‘unreadiness’, are focussed on giving the child time to mature and become prepared for the demands of primary school. These main practices will now be discussed.

### **‘Redshirting’**

‘Redshirting’<sup>92</sup> is a common term used in the USA and throughout the literature to refer to delayed school entry, usually involving the child being delayed starting primary school. The practice relates to the view that a child would benefit from an extra year before beginning school and is sometimes viewed as ‘the gift of time’.

Barnard-Brak<sup>93</sup> defines ‘redshirting’ as the voluntary practice of “delaying a child’s entry into school in order to give him or her the developmental benefits of having been left back, thus entering the next grade at an older age” (p.43). For some children, the delay can also be viewed as a chance to ‘catch up’ to the perceived state of readiness needed to begin primary school.

Delaying a child’s entry to school may occur for a variety of reasons<sup>94,95,96</sup>, including:

- The child being slightly younger at the eligible school age (that is, their month of birth makes them younger compared to their year-group)
- The belief that a child is not ‘ready’ to begin school for social, emotional, cognitive or other reasons;
- The belief that giving the child an extra year to mature will confer advantage;

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<sup>91</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00094056.2008.10523022>

<sup>92</sup> The term originates from the college sporting practice to ‘bench’ freshman athletes for their first year (rather than playing them in competition) to allow them to gain athletic and physical prowess.

<sup>93</sup> Barnard-Brak, L. (2008) ‘Academic red-shirting among children with learning disabilities’, *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*, Vol. 6 (2), pp. 43-54.

<sup>94</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98097.pdf>

<sup>95</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andrew\\_Martin35/publication/232540499\\_Age\\_Appropriateness\\_and\\_Motivation\\_Engagement\\_and\\_Performance\\_in\\_High\\_School\\_Effects\\_of\\_Age\\_Within\\_Cohort\\_Grade\\_Retention\\_and\\_Delayed\\_School\\_Entry/links/5859e0b608ae3852d2559e13/Age-Appropriateness-and-Motivation-Engagement-and-Performance-in-High-School-Effects-of-Age-Within-Cohort-Grade-Retention-and-Delayed-School-Entry.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andrew_Martin35/publication/232540499_Age_Appropriateness_and_Motivation_Engagement_and_Performance_in_High_School_Effects_of_Age_Within_Cohort_Grade_Retention_and_Delayed_School_Entry/links/5859e0b608ae3852d2559e13/Age-Appropriateness-and-Motivation-Engagement-and-Performance-in-High-School-Effects-of-Age-Within-Cohort-Grade-Retention-and-Delayed-School-Entry.pdf)

<sup>96</sup> <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ973826>

- A culture of parents delaying school entry / redshirting which influences other parents; and/or,
- The parents being advised by early years education / childcare professionals that their child would benefit from being retained in the early years / preschool setting (that is,. delayed school entry as an intervention).

'Redshirting' is often viewed as an advantage due to the assumption that older children will have a higher level of maturity for their age cohort, and as a result, will have an edge. The choice to delay entry in order to confer a perceived edge or advantage among the peer group is known as *positive selection*.<sup>97</sup> It is sometimes also referred to as 'gaming behaviour', reflecting the notion that parents choosing to redshirt children for advantage are attempting to game the system.<sup>98</sup>

Many other parents choose to redshirt their children on the basis of concerns for their development, particularly when compared with the child's peer and age cohort. Also known as *negative selection* or a developmental response to 'redshirting', the focus here is less on conferring advantage and more on the child's readiness to enter school<sup>99</sup>. Many point out the counterintuitive nature of negative selection where by virtue of being retained at home or in the early year's setting, the child may not access key educational and support services until they begin primary school – services which would assist the child's development and readiness for education.

Qualitative investigation of the motivations to delay kindergarten entry shows a similar dichotomy. Noel and Newman (2010) reported that mothers who had opted to delay their child's school start fell into two categories – those delaying due to developmental concerns or other child variables, and those delaying on the basis of their personal philosophies on child development and schooling.<sup>100</sup>

### **Grade retention**

Grade retention is the practice of 'holding a child back', in other words, keeping the child at the same grade level for an additional year<sup>101</sup>. Like with red-shirting,

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<sup>97</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0885200616300795>

<sup>98</sup> <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ973825.pdf>

<sup>99</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0885200616300795>

<sup>100</sup> [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1207/s15566935eed1404\\_6?needAccess=true](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1207/s15566935eed1404_6?needAccess=true)

<sup>101</sup> <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.529.1365&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

children are often retained on the basis that having an extra year will allow them to 'catch-up' and mitigate future failure in the higher classes.<sup>102</sup>

In Ireland, Primary Circular 32/03 (2003) outlines the policy on retaining children in primary school<sup>103</sup>, stressing that retention takes place only in exceptional circumstances and for educational reasons. The school principal, following consultations with the learning support teacher, class teacher and parents may make a decision to retain the child. A programme must be put in place for any retained child detailing the 'new' approach that will be taken with the child in the additional year and a clear outline of the expected benefits.

In the US, the introduction of standardised testing and quantification of 'readiness' has been used as a means to identify children who are under-performing at kindergarten and other levels. These children may be retained for an additional year. There is evidence from the literature that educators have limited knowledge of the research on grade retention. Despite a wealth of evidence showing that at best, retention has little impact on positive outcomes, most view the practice positively - especially in the early years and as an intervention to prevent future failure.<sup>104105106</sup>

### **Social promotion**

Social promotion is the opposite of grade retention and is hotly debated in the US. It is usually defined as the practice of promoting a child to the next grade, even where they have not met the educational standards to do so.<sup>107</sup> Opponents of social promotion often cite the negative effects of grade retention on children while proponents see it as a motivating force for students that allows for greater accountability and standards in schools.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical\\_reports/2009/RAND\\_TR678.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2009/RAND_TR678.pdf)

<sup>103</sup> [https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/pc32\\_03.pdf](https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/pc32_03.pdf)

<sup>104</sup> <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10355/4681/research.pdf?sequence=3>

<sup>105</sup> <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1098386.pdf>

<sup>106</sup>

<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/anonymous?id=GALE%7CA127013745&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=fulltext&issn=00131172&p=AONE&sw=w&authCount=1&isAnonymousEntry=true>

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.colorado.edu/education/sites/default/files/attached-files/Flunking%20Grades.pdf>

<sup>108</sup> <https://www.colorado.edu/education/sites/default/files/attached-files/Flunking%20Grades.pdf>

Making the case for social promotion, proponents often take an interactionist view of the child's readiness to enter the next grade.<sup>109,110</sup> Instead of the child hitting milestones / standards before progressing, they argue that scaffolding the child's learning and providing for new challenges that are above the child's ability spur on learning and achievement.

Further discussion on the effects of 'redshirting', grade retention and social promotion will now be discussed.

## Literature review

### Research on 'redshirting' / delayed school entry

In general, the evidence on the outcomes of redshirting is mixed.<sup>111,112,113</sup> Children who are redshirted tend to be male, from higher socio-economic classes and have higher rates of later participation in special educational services in primary school.<sup>114,115,116</sup>

Much of the research showing the positive outcomes of "redshirting" looked at the relative age of the child – the 'old for grade' effects - finding that older children were more likely to score higher on academic tests<sup>117,118,119</sup>, were more

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<sup>109</sup>

[https://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewiapNPD7PraAhVCLIAKHeJ3ApAQFggUAAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.stirling.gov.uk%2F\\_documents%2Feducation-and-learning%2Fenrolment%2Fdeferredentryresearch.pdf&usg=AOvVawLi5-IUSuN8Z23jLbXb1JKs](https://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewiapNPD7PraAhVCLIAKHeJ3ApAQFggUAAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.stirling.gov.uk%2F_documents%2Feducation-and-learning%2Fenrolment%2Fdeferredentryresearch.pdf&usg=AOvVawLi5-IUSuN8Z23jLbXb1JKs)

<sup>110</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0885200618300309>

<sup>111</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98097.pdf>

<sup>112</sup> <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ973825.pdf>

<sup>113</sup>

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andrew\\_Martin35/publication/232540499\\_Age\\_Appropriateness\\_and\\_Motivation\\_Engagement\\_and\\_Performance\\_in\\_High\\_School\\_Effects\\_of\\_Age\\_Within\\_Cohort\\_Grade\\_Retention\\_and\\_Delayed\\_School\\_Entry/links/5859e0b608ae3852d2559e13/Age-Appropriateness-and-Motivation-Engagement-and-Performance-in-High-School-Effects-of-Age-Within-Cohort-Grade-Retention-and-Delayed-School-Entry.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andrew_Martin35/publication/232540499_Age_Appropriateness_and_Motivation_Engagement_and_Performance_in_High_School_Effects_of_Age_Within_Cohort_Grade_Retention_and_Delayed_School_Entry/links/5859e0b608ae3852d2559e13/Age-Appropriateness-and-Motivation-Engagement-and-Performance-in-High-School-Effects-of-Age-Within-Cohort-Grade-Retention-and-Delayed-School-Entry.pdf)

<sup>114</sup> <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ973826>

<sup>115</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98097.pdf>

<sup>116</sup> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/00028312037002509>

<sup>117</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/121/4/1437/1855234?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

<sup>118</sup> <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2009-04640-022>

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775705000117>

likely to attend college<sup>120</sup> and were more likely to occupy leadership roles in secondary (high) school<sup>121</sup>.

Children who were old for grade were also at higher risk of school dropout, and more likely to have social / emotional issues<sup>122</sup>. Some studies refuted the claim of academic advantage showing little or no effect on educational outcomes and highlighted children's disengagement and lower homework completion.<sup>123</sup>

Much of the research has not controlled for the motivations to redshirt children nor considered the effects of delayed school entry on children with disabilities<sup>124</sup> however more recently, specific studies pertaining to children with disabilities have been undertaken which will be discussed below.

It is important to note that the vast majority of research on delayed school entry has taken place within the American context. Many studies have focussed on delayed school entry at the kindergarten level but as there is limited uptake of pre-school (pre-K) in the US, these children may be kept out of an educational environment in the 'delayed' year. Thus it is difficult to compare like with like and extrapolating results to the Irish context should be treated with caution.

### **Delayed school entry for children with disabilities**

#### **Datar (2006) Does delaying school entry give children a head start?**

Datar<sup>125</sup> examined groups of children using the **Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten (ECLS-K)** to determine whether kindergarten entrance age has an effect on children's academic achievement in elementary school. A key aspect of her research addressed whether at-risk children, including children

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<sup>120</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/121/4/1437/1855234?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

<sup>121</sup>

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download;jsessionid=C1CBBA9CABF56A1A58B5987ACCC5B75B?doi=10.1.1.394.8881&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

<sup>122</sup> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/00028312037002509>

<sup>123</sup>

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andrew\\_Martin35/publication/232540499\\_Age\\_Appropriateness\\_and\\_Motivation\\_Engagement\\_and\\_Performance\\_in\\_High\\_School\\_Effects\\_of\\_Age\\_Within\\_Cohort\\_Grade\\_Retention\\_and\\_Delayed\\_School\\_Entry/links/5859e0b608ae3852d2559e13/Age-Appropriateness-and-Motivation-Engagement-and-Performance-in-High-School-Effects-of-Age-Within-Cohort-Grade-Retention-and-Delayed-School-Entry.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andrew_Martin35/publication/232540499_Age_Appropriateness_and_Motivation_Engagement_and_Performance_in_High_School_Effects_of_Age_Within_Cohort_Grade_Retention_and_Delayed_School_Entry/links/5859e0b608ae3852d2559e13/Age-Appropriateness-and-Motivation-Engagement-and-Performance-in-High-School-Effects-of-Age-Within-Cohort-Grade-Retention-and-Delayed-School-Entry.pdf)

<sup>124</sup>

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308922699\\_Kindergarten\\_redshirting\\_Motivations\\_and\\_spillovers\\_using\\_census-level\\_data](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308922699_Kindergarten_redshirting_Motivations_and_spillovers_using_census-level_data)

<sup>125</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775705000117>

with disabilities, benefit from delaying kindergarten entrance. Datar specifically investigated whether children who enter kindergarten later score higher and gain faster than their younger counterparts using same-grade comparison.

She examined maths and readings scores at two points on the **ECLS-K**: fall of kindergarten and spring of 1<sup>st</sup> grade (that is. after two years in school). Consistent with other studies, Datar found that children with disabilities were more likely to enter kindergarten at an older age and their initial test scores were lower than children without disabilities – children without disabilities scored just over one-third higher on maths scores and 60% higher on reading scores. She also examines the effects of age of entry, finding:

A disabled child who enters kindergarten at age 5 scores significantly lower on math and reading compared to a child with no disability. However, delaying a disabled child's entrance into kindergarten by 1 year raises her test scores at kindergarten entry beyond that of a 5-year-old entrant with no disability. These results suggest that an extra year out of school compensates to a large extent for the disadvantage presented by disabilities (2006, p. 56).

**Fortner and Jenkins (2017) Kindergarten Redshirting: Motivations and spillovers using census-level data.**

Fortner and Jenkins (2017) tested the effects of delayed school entry for children with special educational or developmental needs. The study employed three panels of state-wide educational administrative data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). By examining exact birthdates, children who were redshirted were identified and matched with their individual educational achievements in maths and reading at third grade (the year of the first standardised tests administered), providing for across-year comparison.

Three categories of children were identified across three time cohorts (2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10) and outcomes compared:

- Children who entered kindergarten at the normal age of school entry, according to the state-wide compulsory school age
- Parents who had redshirted their children on the basis of concerns about their child's development (negative selection)
- Parents who redshirted their children, not out of any concerns, but rather to confer a perceived advantage (positive selection)

The researchers included a number of control variables in their analysis, for example, the child's ethnicity, socio-economic status, English language proficiency, absence from school, grade retention, etc. In general, Fortner and Jenkins found that white, male students were more likely to be redshirted as were students

from higher socio-economic groups, consistent with previous studies. Another finding was that 'redshirting' incidences were clustered in certain communities, possibly due to 'redshirting' behaviour by some parents influencing other parents to adopt the practice.

The researchers reported that where 10% of redshirted students were more likely to be identified as 'gifted' by the third grade. In their disability classification modelling, the odds of redshirted students being identified as disabled were 1.75 times higher than normal entry students. This was viewed as support for the notion that parents are delaying their child's school entry based on developmental concerns.

Of particular interest, were the comparisons between the children who had been designated as having an identified disability by the third grade. Although, not the main focus of the research, the comparisons made found that of these children, those who had been redshirted performed nearly one-third of a standard deviation lower on the third-grade standardised maths test and no different to normal entry students on the standardised third-grade reading test. As such, this is one of the first studies to show a detrimental effect of delayed school entry for children with disabilities.

Fortner and Jenkins are unequivocal, despite the relatively small size of these comparative groups, that

The hold-out year is doubly costly for children with developmental concerns: parents must spend their time or money to care for the child while they are not in kindergarten, and this time away from school may be detrimental to their child's wellbeing. (p. 52)

They note that children with developmental concerns who present to public schools have access to better intervention services and supports which allow for the earlier identification of their needs, and well-structured interventions and instruction. Fortner and Jenkins further call on educators to reach out and encourage parents who have concerns about their child's development to enrol them in school as soon as they are eligible to attend.

### Fortner and Jenkins (2018), **Is delayed school entry harmful for children with disabilities?**

Following from their 2017 research, Fortner and Jenkins further their research on the effects of delayed school entry for children with disabilities, particularly from the viewpoint that children with disabilities are not a homogenous group. With the percentage of children with disabilities increasingly enrolling in mainstream schooling (reported at 13%), and the number of children being redshirted increasing each year, the researchers specifically sought to examine

the effects of delayed entry to kindergarten for children across a number of disability categories.

Using the same **NCDPI** dataset for the years 2006-2007 through 2012-2013, children who had been redshirted and children who had entered school at the normal time were identified. The children’s enrolment in years 2007-2008, 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 were linked to their third grade **End of Grade (EOG0)** standardised test records in the years 2010-2011, 2011-2012 and 2012-2013.

North Carolina provides sixteen categories of disability though researchers re-classified the designations in order to streamline the model and cater for low-incidence categories. Thus, seven categories were outlined and children re-categorised based on their third-grade records that identified a disability. Children who were identified as having multiple disabilities were rare (0.001% of the sample) and were excluded. Table 31 outlines the researcher categories and frequency of children identified in each.

Category	Percentage of All Students	Percentage of Students with Disabilities	Percentage of Students Redshirted in each Disability Category	NCDPI Designation
Cognitive	0.2%	1.4%	11%	Intellectual Disability – Mild
				Intellectual Disability – Moderate
				Intellectual Disability – Severe
				Traumatic Brain Injury
Physical/Sensory	0.2%	1.5%	9%	Deaf-Blindness
				Deafness
				Hearing Impairment
				Orthopaedic Impairment
				Visual Impairment Including Blindness
Category	Percentage of All Students	Percentage of Students with Disabilities	Percentage of Students Redshirted in	NCDPI Designation

			each Disability Category	
Psychological	0.7%	5.0%	8%	Autism
				Serious Emotional Dis.
Learning	4.4%	31.2%	5%	Specific Learning Disability
Speech/Language	6.3%	44.5%	5%	Speech or Language Impairment
Developmental Delay	0.7%	4.7%	3%	Developmental Delay
Other Disability	1.7%	11.8%	5%	Other Health Impairment
<b>Total</b>	<b>14.1%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>4%</b>	

**Table 31 Categories of disabilities used for analysis (Fortner and Jenkins, 2018, p.174)**

First, Fortner and Jenkins tested the association between ‘redshirting’ and disability (Models 1 and 4, Table 32), and ‘redshirting’ and disability (by category). Consistent with their 2017 study, they found a negative association overall between ‘redshirting’ and student achievement for those identified as having a disability by the third grade (-0.20 SD).

Maths scores for redshirted children with disabilities were -0.6 SD lower when compared to their peers identified as having a disability but who started school at the normal time. As regards reading scores, the combined effect of ‘redshirting’ was not statistically significant, and children with disabilities who were redshirted scored roughly the same as peers with disabilities who began school at the normal time.

Second, Fortner and Jenkins disaggregated the achievement scores by types of disability and found variation in achievement across categories (Models 2 and 5, Table 32). For example, students identified as having a speech/language impairment had lower expected maths achievement scores (-0.14 SD) and lower readings scores (-0.22 SD) while students identified as having a cognitive disability appeared to have more strongly negative effects – maths scores were expected to be -1.16 SD lower and for reading they were expected to be -0.28 SD lower.

**Table 32 Regression results for control variables included models 1-6**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Math	Math	Math	Reading	Reading	Reading
Redshirt	0.131**	0.103**	0.137**	0.173**	0.151**	0.182**
	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.011)
Disabled	-0.396**	0.000	0.000	-0.515**	0.000	0.000
	(0.007)	(.)	(.)	(0.008)	(.)	(.)
Redshirt * Disabled	-0.196**			-0.188**		
	(0.026)			(0.028)		
Cognitive Disability		-1.158**	-1.105**		-1.281**	-1.228**
		(0.052)	(0.052)		(0.048)	(0.048)
Physical Disability		-0.420**	-0.420**		-0.472**	-0.472**
		(0.040)	(0.042)		(0.044)	(0.045)
Psychological Disability		-0.600**	-0.584**		-0.624**	-0.613**
		(0.026)	(0.027)		(0.024)	(0.025)
Learning Disability		-0.602**	-0.589**		-0.898**	-0.887**
		(0.011)	(0.011)		(0.013)	(0.013)
Speech / Language Disability		-0.142**	-0.141**		-0.219**	-0.218**
		(0.008)	(0.008)		(0.007)	(0.008)
Developmental Delay		-0.516**	-0.505**		-0.522**	-0.513**
		(0.023)	(0.024)		(0.022)	(0.023)
Other Health Impairment		-0.767**	-0.752**		-0.774**	-0.755**
		(0.016)	(0.016)		(0.016)	(0.017)
Redshirt * Cognitive Disability			-0.485**			-0.499**
			(0.129)			(0.143)
Redshirt * Physical Disability			-0.017			-0.017
			(0.124)			(0.139)
Redshirt * Psychological Disability			-0.216*			-0.158
			(0.096)			(0.101)
Redshirt * Learning Disability			-0.256**			-0.216**
			(0.038)			(0.044)
Redshirt * Speech / Language Disability			-0.028			-0.034
			(0.032)			(0.033)

Review of overage exemptions for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme

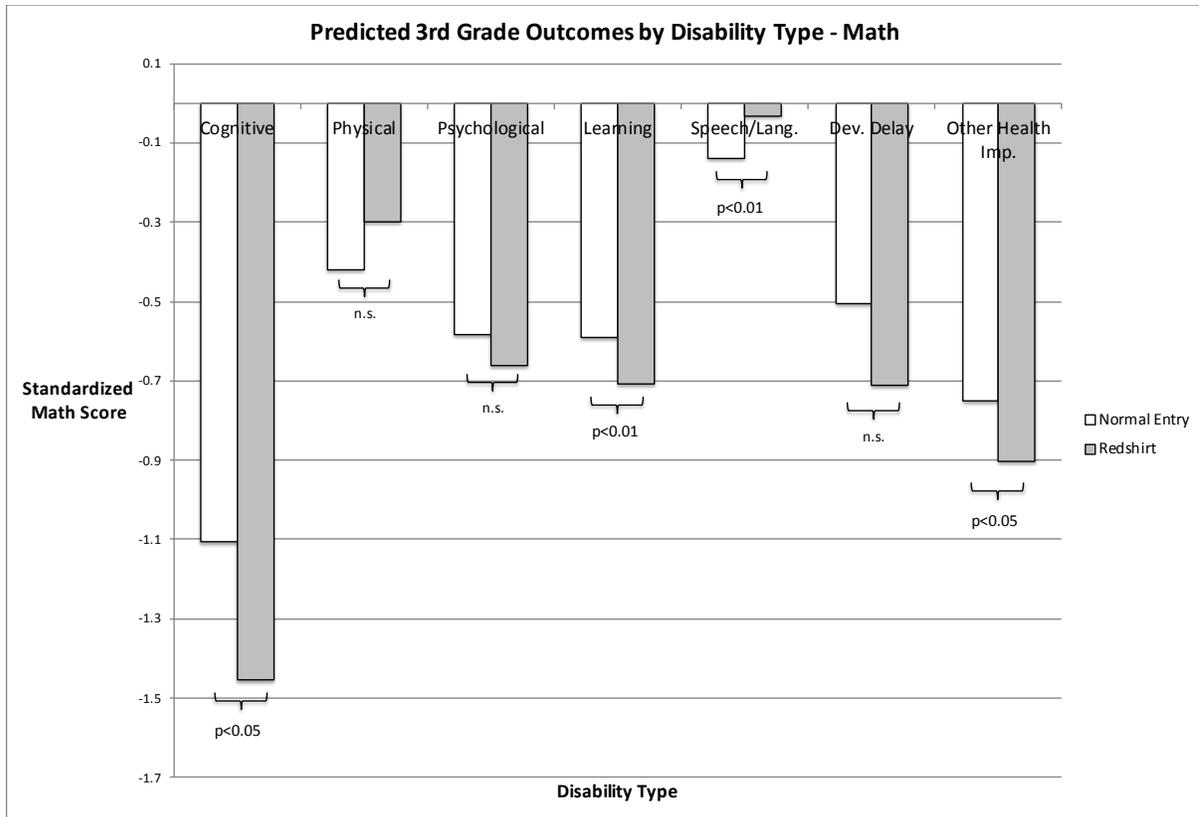
Redshirt * Developmental Delay			-0.343*			-0.305*
			(0.143)			(0.130)
Redshirt * Other Health Impairment			-0.288**			-0.358**
			(0.073)			(0.074)
Constant	0.379**	0.372**	0.370**	0.417**	0.409**	0.407**
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.008)
N	261402	261402	261402	260102	260102	260102

Robust standard errors in parentheses. All models include the full set of controls for student characteristics including: race/ethnicity, English language proficiency status, age (as distance from the cut-off), free or reduced-price lunch eligibility, days absent in third grade, and indicators for academically or intellectually gifted and retained in grade (between kindergarten and third grade). Model results (coefficients) for control variables are available in the Online Supplemental Material, Table 2. \* p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001.

Fortner and Jenkins (2018, p.176)

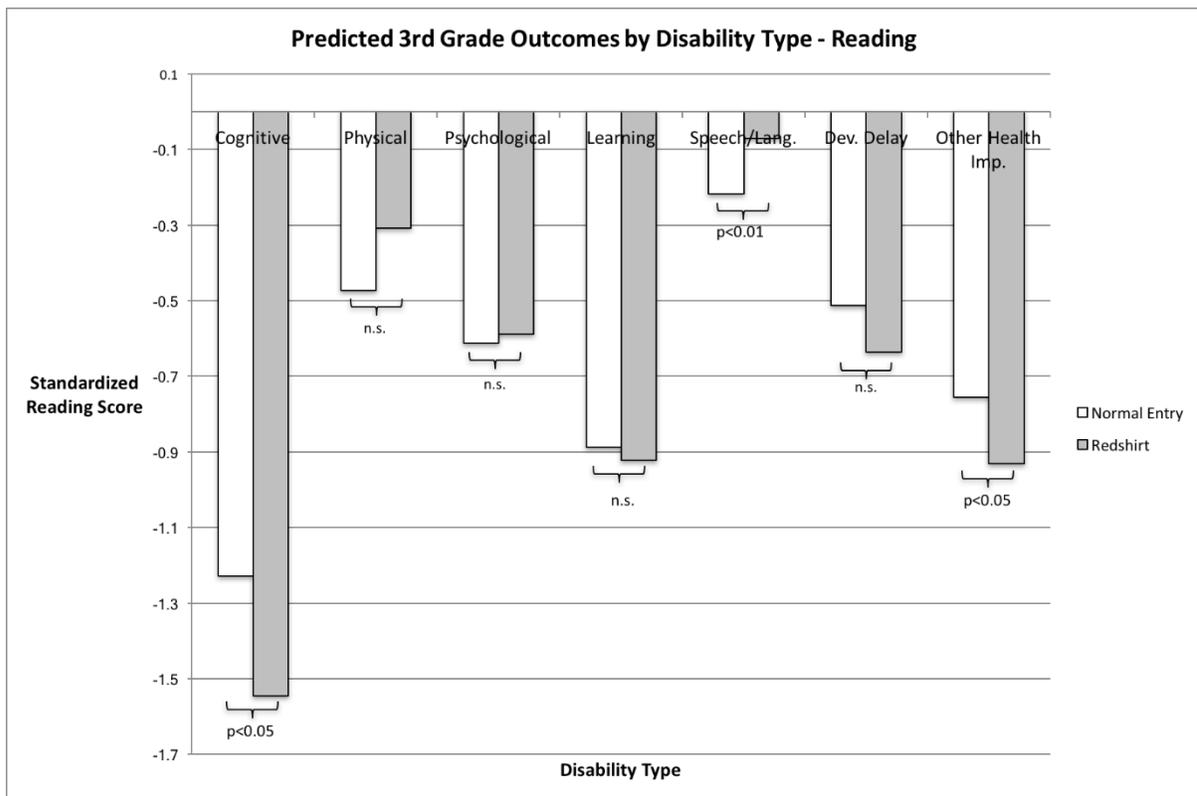
Models 3-6 tested for heterogeneity in associations by introducing interaction terms between each disability category and ‘redshirting’ status. Maths achievement scores were significantly lower for redshirted students in all categories but physical disabilities and speech/language impairment. Reading scores were significantly lower for ‘redshirted’ students in all categories but physical and psychological disabilities and speech/language impairment.

Finally, to properly interpret the total association between disability, ‘redshirting’ and student outcomes, the researchers took into account the positive associations between ‘redshirting’ and achievement as well as the negative associations between achievement and ‘redshirting’ students with different types of disability. The combined coefficient and standard errors for the terms comprising the interactions were estimated in order to present predicted differences between **EOG** maths scores in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for children in each disability category who had redshirted, versus those who had not. Figures 9 and 10 illustrate the differences in predicted scores.



**Figure 9 Predicted 3rd Grade Outcomes by Disability Type – Math**

Taken together, the results of the analyses show little evidence for an association between ‘redshirting’ students with identified disabilities and higher test scores. The exception to this is in speech / language impairments, where both maths and reading scores were predicted to be higher for redshirted students than those entering school at the normal time. Fortner and Jenkins conclude that generally-speaking, parents of children with disabilities should be encouraged to enrol their child in school as soon as possible, not least to access supports available. In the case of speech / language impairments, children may benefit from an extra year to develop their language and literacy skills.



**Figure 10 Predicted 3rd Grade Outcomes by Disability Type - Reading**

**Barnard-Brak, Stevens and Albright (2017) Academic red-shirting and academic achievement among students with ADHD**

Teachers and parents have a tendency to evaluate children’s development and educational readiness based on comparison with peers, rather than performance.

<sup>126</sup> Barnard-Brak et al.<sup>127</sup> found that children with ADHD were 1.48 times more likely to be redshirted. It is possible the behaviours of redshirted children with ADHD can appear more age-appropriate when compared to younger classmates, particularly as many of the signs of ADHD relate to impulse control and inhibition. This has implications for readiness concepts, referral and identifying support needs for these children.

<sup>126</sup> <http://jhr.uwpress.org/content/44/3/641.refs>

<sup>127</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284015229\\_Academic\\_red-shirting\\_and\\_academic\\_achievement\\_among\\_students\\_with\\_ADHD](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284015229_Academic_red-shirting_and_academic_achievement_among_students_with_ADHD)

Using data from the **Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K)**, the researchers identified children who were medicated (n=426) and un-medicated (n=631) for ADHD, their maths and reading scores at seven time points from the fall semester of kindergarten to the summer semester of 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and their ‘redshirting’ status (for example, voluntary/parental decision).

The growth rate for redshirted children with ADHD (medicated) on reading was not statistically significant across time. For maths, there was a statistically significant inverse relationship suggesting that the more likely a student was to be redshirted, the slower the rate of growth over time. However, for children with ADHD (un-medicated), there was a positive relationship between red-shirting and rate of growth in maths over time.

Barnard-Brak et al. also considered the symptoms of inattention over time, finding that for medicated students who were red-shirted, they had a statistically significant rate of growth in their inattention over time. The researchers conclude that “the ‘gift of time’ does not appear to translate into children with ADHD who were red-shirted relative to children with ADHD who were not red-shirted” (p.10).

Barnard-Brak et al. also emphasise that how the child is stimulated during the extra year prior to school entry can have an impact on cognitive gains – for example, whether the child has structured learning experiences in preschool or the family home.

### **Research on early grade retention –versus- social promotion**

Much research emphasis has been placed on the effects of grade retention versus social promotion, not least as educational policy in the US has at various times proposed and opposed the practice of retention.<sup>128</sup> The contentious nature of grade retention has resulted in a large volume of research being carried out into the effects of the practice. Largely, the evidence is equivocal – grade retention has little demonstrable benefit and may even be detrimental for children.

A number of meta-analyses provide a good overview of the literature and are presented below.

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<sup>128</sup> For example, the Clinton-era ‘No Child Left Behind’ policy aimed to end social promotion; standardised readiness testing assumes that children not making the grade will be retained in grade until they are ready to move up.

## Meta-analyses

Holmes (1989)<sup>129</sup> reported that despite little to no evidence of any academic benefit from grade retention, the practice remains popular. He reviewed 63 studies including 20 published studies, 22 dissertations, 18 master's theses, and 3 unpublished papers. The review updated a previous meta-analysis (Holmes and Matthews, 1984) and concluded that although retention in the early grades was not as negative as the later grades, the practice was still harmful. Though nine studies reported positive effects, the retention was often accompanied by remediation so it was difficult to isolate the retention effects. Many studies also compared retained children more favourably with their grade-matched rather than age-matched peers and few studies provided for follow-up. Where gains were identified and tracked, they tended to be short lived.

Another aspects of Holmes' review took in more socio-emotional effects of retention, like personal adjustment, self-concept, attitudes and attendance. He did not find that attitudes towards school differed between retained and non-retained students. Regarding personal adjustment, his findings were inconclusive as the result of 'no negative effect' was influenced by large magnitudes of positive effects from only three studies. Holmes concludes by reiterating findings from a previous meta-analysis – that the evidence for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes.

Jimerson (2001) systematically reviewed and provided a meta-analysis of studies published between 1990 and 1999 on the effects of grade retention. Some of the key findings of his analysis included:

- No significant difference in outcomes among those who were retained in early or later elementary school grades
- The exploration of academic outcomes showed that 47% of the reviewed research favoured the comparison group of promoted students/matched age or grade mates over grade retained students, 9% favoured those who were retained and 48% showed no significant difference between the two groups
- The exploration of socio-emotional outcomes showed that 9% of the reviewed research favoured the comparison group of promoted students/matched age or grade mates, 5% favoured those who were retained and 86% showed no significant difference between the two groups

Jimerson highlights the transactional nature of development, specifically the combination of individual characteristics and history, environments, and

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<sup>129</sup> <https://www.colorado.edu/education/sites/default/files/attached-files/Flunking%20Grades.pdf>

experiences both inside and outside school. He states that given the developmental history of many retained students,

“it is not surprising that retaining a child at grade level has failed to demonstrate long-term effectiveness on socioemotional or achievement outcomes” (p.432).

Jimerson makes the case that retention alone is unlikely to have much remedial value – additional resources and services are needed to scaffold the child’s development and lead to better outcomes.

The Rand Organisation did an extensive literature review on the effects of retention on students’ academic and non-academic outcomes.<sup>130</sup> The review took in 91 studies published from 1980 to 2008 (87 empirical studies, 3 meta-analyses and one systematic review of literature). Studies published during this period were selected for their relevance to the subject of the effects of grade retention and their methodological rigour. The review highlighted some general findings around grade retention:

- Most of the studies found a negative relationship between grade retention and later academic achievement. Where some studies found that retention led to academic gains, these gains tended to be short term, tapering off over time. Other studies comparing retained students to a matched control group of regularly progressing but low-achieving students found no academic benefit and even negative impacts on retained students
- Where studies found positive academic outcomes around grade retention, the students tended to receive specific interventions in the additional year and it is hard to attribute the positive effects to the retention or the interventions
- Retained students were more likely to drop out of school, less likely to attend post-secondary level education, and more likely to have poorer employment outcomes, for example, lower earnings
- For non-academic outcomes, there are mixed reports with some studies finding that retention led to better social, emotional, attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, and others finding that it led to worse outcomes.
- Children with disabilities and poor health were at increased risk of grade retention, and kindergarten students are often recommended for retention on the basis of emotional immaturity and displays of problematic behaviours

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<sup>130</sup> [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical\\_reports/2009/RAND\\_TR678.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2009/RAND_TR678.pdf)

More specifically, the Rand review covered 11 empirical studies on the academic effects of retention in the early years (Kindergarten or Grade 1). Researchers found that being held back at this stage failed to improve academic performance and often had negative effects on student achievement down the line.

### **Specific studies on retention at Kindergarten / pre-primary level**

Shepard (1989) argues that specific research on the effects of Kindergarten is needed, rather than attempting to extrapolate results from later-grade retention. She restates the benefits put forward by many educators, namely that repetition at Kindergarten level has a different flavour<sup>131</sup>. It is seen as a preventative measure to mitigate future failures and as the retention occurs prior to these failures, it carries less stigma.

Bailtewicz (1998)<sup>132</sup> examined the long-term academic outcomes of being retained in Kindergarten. Children who were retained entered a Transition programme which provided remediation classes, often as a result of perceived immaturity or academic deficiency. By comparing these retained children with children who had been assigned to the Transition programme but did not enter it (that is, they were promoted as normal), Bailtewicz found that the retained students' scores in reading, maths and language at sixth grade were significantly lower.

It was estimated that the retained students were on average nine months behind their non-retained peers, and thirteen months behind them in reading scores specifically. Bailtewicz makes the point that

the retained students are not only chronologically a year behind their modal peers, but they are also academically a year behind their classmates who are a year younger (p.14).

Cooley Fruehwirth et al.'s investigated the timing of retention and the effect on outcomes.<sup>133</sup> Using data from the **ECLS-K**, the researchers found that students who were retained in kindergarten would have performed 27% higher in the subsequent year had they not been retained, though these initial losses appear to diminish over time. They reported that students with the lowest abilities were more negatively affected by retention, possibly because resources are invested disproportionately in higher ability retainees.

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<sup>131</sup> <https://www.colorado.edu/education/sites/default/files/attached-files/Flunking%20Grades.pdf>

<sup>132</sup> <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED424616.pdf>

<sup>133</sup> <http://www.unc.edu/~joubertc/CooleySeminar.pdf>

Mantzicopolous and Morrison (1992) note that the repetition of a year at Kindergarten level is often due to concerns about the child's (perceived) developmental readiness and ability to acquire academic skills. It is the 'intervention of choice' for children who are immature socially and have difficulty acquiring basic academic skills.

Comparing retained and promoted students (same-age and same-grade comparison with matched pairs), Mantzicopolous and Morrison found that academic gains made in the second (retained) year of Kindergarten did not last beyond the end of that additional year.

Mantzicopolous and Morrison also examined the behavioural effects of retention, though they noted that difficulties in identifying appropriate comparative groups made their findings difficult to interpret. They reported that teacher ratings of children's conduct problems, hyperactivity, and anxious, withdrawn or psychotic behaviours were higher for retained students in the first year of Kindergarten. Reports of these behaviours sharply declined in the retained year. Though this suggested that behavioural issues were ameliorated to some degree in the retained year, the researchers noted that these effects could be a consequence of

- Teacher bias - that teachers who support the view of 'unready' children will be more likely to describe them as having highly immature behaviour in the first year, and
- Regression to the mean effects - in this case, that low-performing students who are retested will likely achieve somewhat higher scores

Despite the reduction in behavioural issues found, the researchers are equivocal that the "evidence does not support the conclusion that kindergarten retention is beneficial to young at-risk children" (1992, p.196).

Mantzicopolous followed up this study with a re-examination of the positive effects of retention for children with attention problems (1997). Following-up with 40 of the original participants who had high inattention, he found no significant academic benefits for the children retained nor did high inattention scores improve as a result of the extra year in Kindergarten - in fact they were accompanied by increased behavioural problems. He concluded that the investigation did

"not support the notion that pre-elementary school retention is a beneficial educational intervention for children with academic and/or behaviour difficulties" (p.126).

Ferguson, Jimerson and Dalton (2001) investigated the in-group characteristics of retained children - for instance, their family background, demographics, parental

value of education and other factors. The researchers tracked the retained students' educational achievement from Kindergarten to 11<sup>th</sup> grade, taking in standardised test scores, parental surveys, teacher ratings and school records to test if the retained child's context has any bearing on educational outcomes.<sup>134</sup> Retained children tended to have better educational outcomes when on entering Kindergarten initially:

- Their school readiness scores were higher
- They were significantly younger
- They were less aggressive
- They were more socially adept in kindergarten
- They came from families which highly valued education, and
- Their mother's had higher levels of education

Jimerson (1999) discusses the characteristics associated with a child being retained, noting a number of other studies in the area. Children with developmental delays and learning disabilities appear more likely to be retained, as do children who “display more maladaptive behaviours and are less confident, self-assured, engaging, socially competent, and popular with peers”.<sup>135</sup>

McLeskey and Grizzle (1992) looked at the rates of children with learning disabilities who were retained in Indiana, their characteristics and this cohort in comparison with children with learning disabilities that were not retained.<sup>136</sup> Fifty-eight percent of children were retained prior to being identified as having a learning disability and it appeared that retention was being used as a remedial intervention prior a learning disability being identified, though retention often served only to delay the identification. The retained children were found to have lower IQ and achievement levels than the children with learning disabilities who were not retained, and even when IQ was accounted for, also had lower educational achievement scores.

Dougan and Pijanowski (2011) report that whereas a lot of the ‘redshirting’ research shows positive effects of the child being among the eldest in the class, these positives are not true of grade retained children. They attribute this to the

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<sup>134</sup>

[http://mina.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/NEW%20retention/Publications/PITS\\_SuccessfulFailures2001.pdf](http://mina.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/NEW%20retention/Publications/PITS_SuccessfulFailures2001.pdf)

<sup>135</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022440599000059>

<sup>136</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1592080>

negative emotional impacts of grade retention on the child which affect school achievement.<sup>137</sup>

Jimerson (1999) compared three groups of students over a 21-year longitudinal study: children who had been retained once between kindergarten and 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade; children who were low-achieving but had been promoted each grade (LAP), and a control group of randomly selected, normally promoted children. Children with disabilities were excluded from all participant groups. Jimerson found that there were no difference between the retained and LAP participants on academic achievement and both groups displayed similar intellectual functioning. However, retained children showed more behavioural problems in the classroom, missed more school, were ranked lower in emotional health and had lower peer acceptance/popularity.

Findings in the longer term indicated that retained students had significantly lower academic and employment outcomes when compared to LAP participants and control group. There was much less difference between the LAP participants and the control group. On many measures they were comparable.

The following key findings were reported:

- Greater percentage rates of high school dropout by age 19 (69% compared to 46% LAP)
- A lower percentage of high school diploma achievement by age 20 (44% compared to 72% LAP)
- (Although not statistically significant) retained students appeared least likely to attend post-secondary education than any of the cohorts
- Lower employment / education status in late adolescence – least likely to be working, in education or a combination of both
- Earned significantly less per hour than the other groups
- Lower work competence ratings

With special regard to grade retention at kindergarten, in a previous study Jimerson (2001) shows that the notion that a child repeating kindergarten will increase their academic achievement is not supported by the data.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ973826.pdf>

<sup>138</sup> <https://www.cde.state.co.us/sacpie/metaanalysisofgraderetentionresearch>

Studies report gains made by retained students may appear in the short term but tend to taper off over time<sup>139,140</sup>. Shepherd and Smith (1990) discuss the practice of retaining children in kindergarten in order to prevent future academic failure. They find no evidence of any academic benefit across sixteen controlled studies, looking at children from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, when comparing kindergarten-retained children with those who were sent as usual.

Further, Shepherd and Smith note that children retained in kindergarten had lower self-concepts and poorer attitudes to school. Parent interviews highlighted child distress around being teased, seeing their friends progress while they remained, and a certain wistfulness – the realisation that had they been able, they would be in a higher grade at that point.<sup>141</sup>

Hong and Raudenbush (2005) examined the effects of grade retention beyond the retainees, investigating the effects that a school's retention policy at the Kindergarten level has on those retained and those promoted but at-risk, as well as the average academic outcomes among the wider student group. They examined data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten cohort (ECLS-K) which followed 20,000 Kindergarten students across Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

They found no evidence that a policy of retaining children at Kindergarten level made any academic difference to the wider student group. One of the suggested benefits of retention is that classrooms become more homogenous environments, allowing for more efficient instruction and consequently, better academic outcomes. Hong and Raudenbush note that their findings of no difference among schools with and without retention policies casts doubt that having a more homogenous group improves instruction. However, increasing homogeneity may have the unintended consequence of lessening the adaptation of instruction to suit individual students and their diversity of needs (Shepard and Smith, 1989).

Hong and Raudenbush did find evidence that children who were retained would have learned more had they been promoted to the next grade instead and these effects could be seen in both reading and maths. They calculated that the loss in academic growth for retained students was equivalent to almost half a year, and reported that “even for those who tended to be diagnosed as in a relatively higher need of repeating a grade, there was no evidence that they received any

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<sup>139</sup> <https://www.cde.state.co.us/sacpie/metaanalysisofgraderetentionresearch>

<sup>140</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022440599000059>

<sup>141</sup> [http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed\\_lead/el\\_199005\\_shepard.pdf](http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_199005_shepard.pdf)

immediate benefit from the retention treatment” (2005, pg. 220). Learning potential is constrained for all but the highest-risk children, however, the researchers do not define the characteristics of the highest-risk group.

Hong and Yu (2007)<sup>142</sup> investigated whether the negative effects of Kindergarten retention on learning would perpetuate. For those retained in Kindergarten, the negative effects on reading and maths scores had largely faded by the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. However, for those retained in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, the negative effects remained almost constant for three years after the retained year.

In a later study, Hong and Yu (2008)<sup>143</sup> examined the effects of retention at Kindergarten level on socio-emotional outcomes as the child moves through primary school. They found no evidence to suggest that retention had negative effects on socio-emotional development. On the contrary, their findings suggest that had the students been promoted to the 1<sup>st</sup> grade instead of retained, they would have developed lower levels of self-confidence, and less interest in reading two years later. Additionally, Hong and Yu found that these students would also have displayed a higher level of internalising problem behaviours after the retained year, and two years later.

### **Children’s voices on retention**

The literature documenting children’s attitudes and experiences of retention again occurs mainly in the American context where promotion/retention is often intrinsically linked to standardised testing. As such, retention can be used as a motivator and a threat to ‘keep up’.<sup>144</sup> Likewise, the sources noted deal mainly with Grade 1 retention – when the child has already entered primary school.

Byrnes (1989)<sup>145</sup> interviewed retained students in Grades 1, 3 and 6, ‘good’ students and students slated for retention, gathering their experiences and impressions of grade retention. The study focussed in particular at students in the lower grades as retention occurs most often in the earlier phases and parents and teachers see the retention of younger students as less stigmatising.

Byrnes notes that it was evident from the children’s responses that they were uncomfortable admitting they had been retained, with one student even recruiting a friend to keep her retention ‘secret’ in the interviews. She found that 43% of girls in Grade 1 who had been retained were reluctant to identify

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<sup>142</sup> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0162373707309073>

<sup>143</sup> <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2008-02379-010>

<sup>144</sup> <https://www.colorado.edu/education/sites/default/files/attached-files/Flunking%20Grades.pdf>

<sup>145</sup> <https://www.colorado.edu/education/sites/default/files/attached-files/Flunking%20Grades.pdf>

themselves as being retained to the researchers which she attributes to the possibility of girls being more aware of the stigma surrounding retention. Byrnes discusses this reluctance as a reflection of shame.

The children felt that being held back was overwhelmingly negative – 84% of the responses centred on being “sad”, “bad” or “upset” with others naming embarrassment. Another participant, fearing others knowing he was retained, dreaded his birthday and being asked how old he would be. Only 6% of participants reported positive impressions of being retained but several of these children also thought that it would have been better to be promoted. Twenty-one percent of children thought there was ‘nothing good’ about being retained.

When the non-promoted children were asked what the worst thing about not progressing was, they responded with:

- Being laughed at and teased (22%)
- Not being with friends (16%)
- Being punished (14%)
- Being sad (10%)
- Getting bad grades (8%)
- Being embarrassed (4%)
- Doing the same work (4%)

Gleason et al.<sup>146</sup> examined the short-term effects of retention in Grade 1 on peer relations. Sociometric interviews were conducted with classmates of the retained pupils, asking them about the emotional symptoms, conduct problems, and academic competencies of their retained classmate as well as their liking for the child. They found that peer acceptance of retained children increased in the repeated year

because their younger, less experienced classmates view them as meeting the day-to-day academic and behavioral challenges better during their repeat year than their same-age, equally experienced classmates viewed them the prior year.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2860611/>

<sup>147</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2860611/>

Studies that monitored peer-liking in the longer term would suggest that that though retained children gained peer-liking in the retained year, this faded in subsequent years.<sup>148</sup>

### **Duration at early years education**

The evidence on the effects of longer duration in pre-school is mixed. An earlier review by the National Disability Authority highlighted the dearth of research on the subject of pre-school duration for children with disabilities or special education needs. A number of studies were presented in the review: the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE); Barnett and Lamy (2006); Broberg et al. (1997) and Bagnato et al. (2002).<sup>149</sup>

The UK's study 'Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)<sup>150</sup> found compelling evidence that a longer duration of attendance at pre-school leads to better outcomes. These were stronger for academic outcomes than social/behavioural development and were also found to be stronger when children attended a high-quality setting. There was a relationship between attendance at pre-school (as opposed to being kept at home) and higher cognitive skill attainment. The authors report that

An extended period of pre-school experience has significant benefits in preparing young children for a better start to school and that such children continue to show better progress during Key Stage 1. (p.40)

A subset of the **EPPE (Early Years Transitions and Special Education Needs – EYTSEN)** <sup>151</sup> study focussed on children 'at risk' of special education needs and included an examination of pre-school practices, policies and characteristics associated with the progress and development of different at-risk groups. For children with special education needs, the research supported the benefits of longer duration at pre-school with "every extra month over two years of age being associated with better cognitive development" (p.54).

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[https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2864494/?utm\\_content=buffer78b6e&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=plus.google.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2864494/?utm_content=buffer78b6e&utm_medium=social&utm_source=plus.google.com&utm_campaign=buffer)

<sup>149</sup> National Disability Authority (2013) 'National Disability Authority briefing paper on the impact of participation for a second year in the Early Childhood Care and Education programme by children with disabilities'

<sup>150</sup> <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10005309/1/sylva2004EPPEfinal.pdf>

<sup>151</sup> <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10005309/1/sylva2004EPPEfinal.pdf>

Barnett and Lamy<sup>152</sup> examined the effects of pre-school attendance for one or two years in New Jersey on measures of vocabulary development, literacy and maths skills soon after the children entered Kindergarten. Though statistically significant differences were not found between those who attended for one or two years on maths and literacy scores, children who had attended pre-school for two years had significantly more developed vocabulary. In their discussion, the researchers highlight the importance of vocabulary in providing a fundamental basis for learning – both for having the language to provide a greater conceptual basis for learning in general, and for freeing up would-be ‘vocabulary development time’ to learn something else.

Broberg et al.<sup>153</sup> conducted a longitudinal study following 146 children in Göteborg, Sweden. Children were recruited from waiting lists of public childcare facilities between 12 and 24 months and followed until they were 101 months (roughly 8 years old). The children were firstborn (or not living with siblings under the age of 12), living with parents (married or unmarried) and were not attending regular day care. They were assessed four times post-recruitment on verbal abilities, maths abilities and inhibition (particularly focused on the child’s inhibition or shyness when with an unfamiliar adult, and the child’s involvement in a peer-play situation). The research design allowed consideration of time spent in different pre-school environments up to and just beyond the child’s commencement in primary school at age seven.

The research aimed to identify aspects of the children’s backgrounds which impacted their cognitive development. Of the various factors, the type of early childcare environment was a predictor of development in this regard. The researchers reported

Children who had spent more months in centre-based day care before they were 40 months old obtained higher scores on tests of cognitive ability than did other children. For children who had spent 3 or more preschool years in out-of-home care, quality of alternative care was also predictive (p.67).

The quality of adult-child interaction predicted children’s verbal abilities while child-staff ratio, group size and age range (structural measures) predicted mathematical ability.

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<sup>152</sup> <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.514.1151&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

<sup>153</sup>

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael\\_Lamb/publication/262140984\\_Determinants\\_of\\_verbal\\_abilities\\_A\\_longitudinal\\_perspective/links/00b495370a92e24f2f000000.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael_Lamb/publication/262140984_Determinants_of_verbal_abilities_A_longitudinal_perspective/links/00b495370a92e24f2f000000.pdf)

Bagnato et al.<sup>154</sup> assessed the first-phased results of the Pittsburgh **Early Childhood Initiative (ECI)** which implemented high-quality early years childcare and education options for children in high-risk neighbourhoods. These children's retention (at placement in special education at Kindergarten) ranged from 18-40% and the average age of children enrolled on the **ECI** was 3 years old. Using the **Development Observation Checklist System (DOCS)**, children were assessed for developmental competency across five main functional domains: cognitive, language, social, and motor, and overall developmental level.

As all potential participants were enrolled in the **ECI**, comparison was achieved by producing the **DOCS** scores that could be expected through maturation alone (for example, no intervention) with the observed **DOCS** scores of the children. Significant differences between the expected and observed **DOCS** scores were reported.

The scores were examined within two cohorts of children participating – a full high-risk group who were considered at risk in terms of child welfare and poverty (86%) and those who had a developmental delay<sup>155</sup> (14%). Bagnato et al. noted

During the course of intervention, the full high-risk group maintained a slightly accelerated, but essentially normal rate of developmental gain without regressions, whereas the delayed group progressed at 1.6 months of gain for each month in the intervention (p.568)

Regarding the duration of time, the researchers state

Our results seem to mirror the conclusions of most other research in early childhood intervention that underscore the importance of sustained programming for children at developmental risk. Children (that is, both with delays and at-risk) who participated in **ECI** for the longest periods of time demonstrated the most enhanced developmental progress during intervention. Moreover, our

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<sup>154</sup>

[https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/44991881/Child\\_developmental\\_impact\\_of\\_Pittsburgh20160422-9699-1eys2of.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1526486893&Signature=QAxTw70aA3D%2Bwc0B2vRMLg3cttc%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DChild\\_developmental\\_impact\\_of\\_Pittsburgh.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/44991881/Child_developmental_impact_of_Pittsburgh20160422-9699-1eys2of.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1526486893&Signature=QAxTw70aA3D%2Bwc0B2vRMLg3cttc%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DChild_developmental_impact_of_Pittsburgh.pdf)

<sup>155</sup> This was defined as children who, at pre-intervention, were 1.5 SD below the average or 25% below the chronological age in one or more domains of the Pennsylvania Early Education and Special Education Standards.

descriptive data on early school success show that these same children beat the historical odds, were promoted, avoided special education placements, and performed within the average to above average range on nationally standardized measures of early learning (p.575)

It should be noted that the **EPPE, EYTSN**, Barnett and Lamy, Broberg et al. and Bagnato et al. studies focussed on duration from an early starting point (rather than a later end point). Another area of duration research has focussed on the effects of delaying the end point of Kindergarten.

Karweit and Wasik (1992)<sup>156</sup> reviewed educational practices that provided a child with an extra year at kindergarten. They looked at controlled studies which compared children who had been retained with children who had been recommended for retention, but were promoted. They concluded that kindergarten retention leads to immediate benefits in the year of retention but that these do not persist past that point. They suggest that the longitudinal benefits associated with retention are age-related and due to the child being a year older than classmates.

The researchers also discussed transitional first grade. This is an additional year between kindergarten and first grade and children who are immature developmentally, or academically 'unready' are often placed in programmes of this nature. The classes tend to be smaller in size and may have alternative curricula. The programmes also vary by intent – whether the year is set out to be a remedial exercise, or an intervention. Karweit and Wasik cited the work of Bell (1972) who had found that children in these transitional programmes experienced a significant decline in self-concept and negative impacts on self-esteem when compared to their counterparts that had been promoted.

More generally, Karweit and Wasik concluded

...across the separate extra-year programs, there is no evidence that kindergarten retention, developmental kindergarten, or transitional first grade programs are more effective than simply promoting children. But this conclusion does not suggest that these children should simply be promoted in hopes that their problems will go away... Students who were retained... continue to show academic difficulties into the elementary grades. They do not, in short, outgrow their academic problems by buying a year." (p.10)

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<sup>156</sup> <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED357894.pdf>

Shepard (1989) reviewed the literature on a variety of extra-years practices at Kindergarten – for instance, transitional programmes, straight repetition of the year, additional years before Kindergarten (pre-K) and additional years after Kindergarten (transitional 1<sup>st</sup> grade)<sup>157</sup>. She found that on measures of self-concept or attitudes, there did not appear to be any effects of retention. However, academically, these practices appeared to place children further behind where they would have been had they been promoted. Where a minority of studies found positive academic outcomes, they appeared short-lived.

Shepard references a prior review by Gedler (1984) and Leinhardt (1980), both indicating that the best possible outcomes are achieved when children are promoted but receive individualised instruction in the regular classroom setting.

Roberts et al.<sup>158</sup> examined whether the duration of time in school or chronological age better predicted working memory. They tested one thousand, seven hundred and twenty-seven 6-7 year old children in the second primary school year in Victoria, Australia on measures of working memory. Even when controlling for confounding social factors, the evidence suggests that the amount of time a child has spent in school has more of a positive impact on the development of children's verbal and visuospatial working memory than their chronological age in class.

This was the case among children who had been retained and for children requiring extra learning assistance.<sup>159</sup> As working memory is both a key element in learning and an area that can be affected by a range of learning disabilities and mental health conditions (like ADHD), this study would suggest that the duration of schooling (rather than entry point) is most advantageous to children. Researchers reached this conclusion based on a study of children across their second formal year of education. The working memory development curve is unknown across the first year in school.

### **Being 'over-age for grade'**

The research on the child being old for their grade is concerned with the effects of the relative age differential of chronological versus peer age.

Roderick (1994) studied the transcripts of 1,052 high schoolers in Massachusetts to investigate if the high drop-out rates of students who had repeated a grade between Kindergarten and 6<sup>th</sup> Grade were related to the student being 'over-age

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<sup>157</sup> <https://www.colorado.edu/education/sites/default/files/attached-files/Flunking%20Grades.pdf>

<sup>158</sup> <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/61e4/7033e1d6061d445639283b8a3eae9dfd2777.pdf>

<sup>159</sup> <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/61e4/7033e1d6061d445639283b8a3eae9dfd2777.pdf>

for grade'.<sup>160</sup> Of her sample, 36.49% of students had been retained for one or more years (mainly in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade) and of these students, the drop-out rate between the ages of 16 and 19 was 79.84%. This drop-out rate compared to 27.39% of promoted students.

Sixty-one students studied had not repeated a year but had begun school at a later age and thus were older than their grade cohort. Among this group 58% later dropped out of school. Roderick used these cases to estimate the age-related effects of drop-out risks. Controlling for age she re-examined the relationship between retention and the hazard of dropping out. Roderick concluded that

These results suggest that the association between grade retention and the hazard of school leaving that is not explained by school performance through the sixth grade can be explained by an effect of being overage for grade (p.743).

Part of this result can be explained by the fact that students who were overage for grade in the sixth grade would experience substantial disengagement during middle school. They would be much more likely to become middle school dropouts and, among those who remained, would show substantial declines in attendance by the eighth grade. It appears, therefore, that a grade retention may influence a student's school performance at the time that retention occurs and, later, when that student is 14 or 15 and is sitting in a class of 13-year-olds (p.748).

Byrd et al.<sup>161</sup> studied drug usage among children who were old for their grade. Of 1,396 participants, 36% were over-age for grade. Controlling for confounding variables, the researchers found that these older students were more likely to report a range of substance-use and risky behaviours, for instance,

- Using alcohol
- Using tobacco
- Driving in a car with someone who had been drinking
- Using alcohol or other drugs before their last experience of sexual intercourse
- Using cocaine in the past month

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<sup>160</sup> <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.889.4600&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

<sup>161</sup> <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/517935?redirect=true>

- Having ever used crack cocaine
- Using injected or other illicit drugs

Jimerson and Renshaw<sup>162</sup> describe adolescents who had been retained as

more independent, less likely to have close parental supervision over their homework and social experiences, more easily in a position to skip school, and more likely to have greater access to negative influences in the community and online (p.13).

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<sup>162</sup>

<https://www.averyschools.net/cms/lib/NC01000809/Centricity/Domain/21/Synthesis%20of%20retention%20research.pdf>

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## Appendix 4 – Open policy debate

### Introduction

The Open Policy Debate, hosted by the Departments of Children and Youth Affairs and Education and Science, was held on 28 May 2018 in the Mansion House, Dublin, to explore the issues and possible solutions to the proposed changes to overage exemptions within the **Early Childhood Care and Education** scheme.

The Open Policy Debate formed part of a wider review of the matter undertaken by the National Disability Authority. The event brought together parents, practitioners in the Early Years Sector, education sector, HSE clinicians working with young children, relevant statutory agencies and organisations involved in the delivery of the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme and with expertise on children and families who had availed of the exemption in the past.

A Background Paper and Agenda were issued in advance of the Open Policy Debate (see Appendix 4.1). The meeting was addressed by Ms Katherine Zappone TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The process on the day involved short inputs from experts, discussion in small, mixed groups, feedback to plenary sessions, and a final plenary discussion.

### The open policy debate

Chapter 8 of this report provides a summary of the priorities which were identified during the Open Policy Debate. Throughout the event there was considerable consistency in the issues identified as requiring attention. As the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme itself develops, and there is positive and planned transition of children from pre- to primary school as standard practice, then it was anticipated that the need for **Early Childhood Care and Education** overage exemptions would reduce.

Overall, the outcome of the Debate suggests that **Early Childhood Care and Education** overage exemptions are symptomatic, rather than, central and that the priority is to tackle systemic issues, dealing with a range of issues in parallel. As the systemic issues are addressed then the demand for exemptions are expected to reduce. Some of the issues identified are already the subject of attention by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Department of Education and Skills, and other Agencies, as the Background Paper sets out, and there will undoubtedly be improvements on different fronts in the months and years to come.

However, for parents and many others attending the Debate, and for those with children with special/additional needs making choices now and in the short term, medium-term changes are viewed as of little advantage. The windows of opportunity for the individual child is small and if missed there are life-long consequences.

It is important to note that the participants in the Debate were generally positive about the **Early Childhood Care and Education** programme which has been in place since 2010. They recognised that this is a relatively short period in which to establish a national intervention, acknowledging that it is already making a difference to children, including, those with special/additional needs, and that it is still a programme in development.

In an evolving situation where there is ambition across Government to realise an Early Years provision that is of a high standard, the challenge is how best to introduce the changes with the maximum benefit and the least disruption, as systems gear up to the standards required. Further, the changes happening in both the pre- and primary school systems demands strong collaboration between the two Government Departments, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills, if the changes are to be well planned and executed without gaps or inconsistencies

The detailed notes contained in **Appendix 4.2** record observations, ideas and proposed solutions from small group discussions at the Open Policy Debate.

**Appendix 4.1**

**Background Paper and Open Policy Debate Agenda**

**Department of Children and Youth Affairs  
and  
Department of Education and Skills**

**Open Policy Debate**

**Future options for the Early Childhood Care  
and Education (ECCE) overage exemptions**

Monday, 28th May 2018

Mansion House Roundroom,

Dawson Street, Dublin

**Background Paper**

## Introduction/Context

The **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)** programme is a universal programme available to all children within the eligible age range. It provides children with their first formal experience of early learning prior to commencing primary school. The programme is provided for three hours per day, five days per week and the programme year runs from September to June each year. From September 2018 children will be eligible for 2 full years of **ECCE** (when introduced **ECCE** was available for 1 year – 38 weeks. In 2016/17 this was expanded to 61 weeks on average). Childcare services taking part in the **ECCE** scheme must provide an appropriate pre-school educational programme which adheres to the principles of Síolta, the national framework for early years care and education.

Under the rules of **ECCE** there is a requirement that children availing of the scheme must finish on or before reaching the age of 5 years and 6 months. In order for a child to finish later than this age the parents/guardians must apply to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs for an exemption commonly referred to as an overage exemption.

Overage exemptions were introduced at the onset of the **ECCE** programme in 2010. Approximately 500 children have availed of the overage exemption each year since then. In 2010 the ECCE Programme only operated for a 38 week period, or one programme year. For some children with special or additional needs, attending preschool five days a week was not feasible and so an allowance was made to enable them split their **ECCE** provision over 2 years. For example, a child may have availed of 3 days **ECCE** provision in year one and 2 days in year two. Their total **ECCE** provision remained at 38 weeks. This practice of splitting **ECCE** attendance continued after the expansion of the **ECCE** programme to 61 weeks in 2016.

This flexibility was never intended to conflict with the legislative requirement to start school by age six. The law and policy on school start-age is clearly established in Ireland. Children should be in school by the time they are six. The primary school system has a variety of resources to support children with disabilities commence school with their peers.

If children are not in school by six, under the **Educational Welfare Act**, the Educational Welfare service of Tusla must be satisfied that the child is receiving a minimum standard of education in a place other than at a recognised school. (Tusla does this by sending Educational Welfare Inspectors out to the place of the child's education after they have been notified by the parent of the child's situation)

## Changes to ECCE scheme from September 2018

From September 2018, all children meeting the minimum age requirement of 2 years and 8 months will be eligible for a full two programme years **ECCE**. The upper age **ECCE** requirement is that the child must not reach 5 years and 6 months before the end of the programme year.

This extension of **ECCE** from September 2018 refines the development introduced in 2016, whereby three intake dates were adopted (September, January and April), and will increase the duration of each registered child on **ECCE** from a current average of 61 weeks, to an entitlement to 76 weeks (two programme years). This enhancement delivers fully on a commitment in the **Programme for a Partnership Government**.

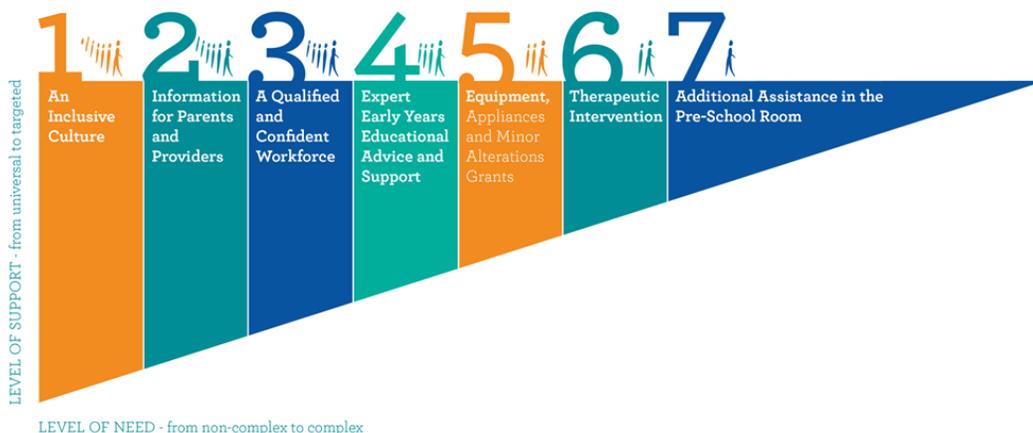
This new measure will also address the situation where there was a wide range in the number of preschool weeks a child could avail of – between 61 and 88 weeks (depending on date of birth) – and will ensure a programme that is more equitable for all children.

The number of entry points will revert to one at the beginning of the new programme year (September, 2018). One enrolment period at the start of the pre-school year will support quality service provision principally by making it easier for services to provide continuity of staffing through the programme year. The single enrolment will also help streamline the administration process and will make it easier for childcare providers to operate and budget for the programme year. This will also make it easier for parents to secure **ECCE** places for their children.

## Access Inclusion Model (AIM)

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs has worked to improve the pre-school experience for children with disabilities and to optimise their early development. The **Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)** was introduced in 2016. It offers 7 different levels of progressive support ranging from universal (1-3) to targeted (4-7) for children with disabilities. Over 5,000 children have so far benefitted from targeted supports and many multiples of this from universal supports.

A Model to Support Access to the ECCE Programme  
for Children with a Disability



The **Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)** seeks to ensure that children with a disability can access **ECCE**. Its goal is to support early years providers to deliver an inclusive pre-school experience. **AIM** is a child-centred and evidence-based model providing supports based on the needs and strengths of the child and the early years setting. Supports provided under **AIM** include:

- The development of an inclusive culture
- Enhanced continuing professional development for early years practitioners
- The provision of equipment, appliances and grants for minor alterations
- Access to therapeutic intervention
- Increased capitation for early years providers in the case of children with very complex needs

The child must qualify on age grounds for the **ECCE** programme and the early years provider must be registered with Tusla and hold an active Department of Children and Youth Affairs contract to deliver the **ECCE** programme. The only exception to this is where the child qualifies for the **ECCE** programme but is availing of early childhood care and education services funded under another Department of Children and Youth Affairs childcare programme such as the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) or Training and Education Childcare (TEC) programmes.

### **Better Start**

**Better Start** is an initiative of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, in collaboration with the Department of Education and Skills and Pobal. The broader

aim of **Better Start** is to bring coordination, cohesion and consistency to the provision of state funded quality supports and to work in alignment with statutory systems, that is. regulation and inspection, in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector.

**Better Start** comprises three pillars: the City and County Childcare Committees, the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations and the National Early Years Quality Development Service.

Under the **Access and Inclusion Model**, it also provides expert advice, mentoring and support to providers and practitioners from specialists in early years care and education for children with disabilities.

### **Department of Education and Skills supports in primary school for children with special education need (SEN)**

The Government is committed to ensuring that all children, including those with learning disabilities and/or mental health issues, can have access to an education appropriate to their needs, preferably in school settings through the primary and post primary school network.

The Department of Education and Skills provides for a continuum of special education provision to be made available, so that regardless of the level of need of the child, educational provision can be made for them.

The policy of the Department of Education and Skills is that children should be included in mainstream placements with additional supports provided where necessary. The extent of supports required for any child in a particular class setting or school will depend on their individual learning needs and the extent of care needs that they may have. In circumstances where children with special educational needs cannot be accommodated in mainstream education, they may be enrolled in special classes or special schools where more intensive and supportive interventions are provided.

Funding for special education provision in 2018 amounts to some €1.75 billion and includes the provision for supports, such as:

- Over thirteen thousand four hundred Special Education Teaching posts in mainstream primary and post primary schools for the 2017/2018 school year, to provide additional teaching support to pupils with special educational needs
- Fifteen thousand Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) which will be available for allocation to primary, post primary and special schools for the new school

year, this is one thousand and ten more posts, or a 7% increase, in the number of posts which were available last year

- Over one thousand one hundred teachers in one hundred and twenty-five special schools, including education provision in Hospital schools and HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMHS) Units
- Approximately one thousand four hundred and forty special classes, which includes one hundred and forty new special classes to be opened in September 2018. This compares to five hundred and forty-eight special classes in 2011, an increase of 162%
- Enhanced capitation grants for special schools and special classes attached to mainstream schools
- Teacher training and continuing professional development in the area of special education through the Special Education Support Service (SESS)
- Special school transport arrangements
- Assistive technology/Specialised equipment
- Special Arrangements for State Examinations

A new Special Education Teaching allocation process was introduced in September 2017. The revised allocation process replaces the generalised allocation process at primary and post primary school level for learning support and high incidence special educational needs, and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) allocation process which provided additional resource teaching supports to schools, to support pupils assessed as having Low Incidence disabilities.

The new Special Education Teaching allocation provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile.

Under the new allocation model, schools are provided with a total allocation for special education needs support based on their school profile.

The provision of a profiled allocation is designed to give a fairer allocation for each school, which recognises that all schools need an allocation for special needs support, but which provides a graduated allocation which takes into account the actual level of need in each school.

## Changes to overage exemptions and subsequent pause

In December 2017 a decision was taken by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, (with the agreement of the Department of Education and Skills) to cease the system of overage exemptions in **ECCE** from September 2018. The intention behind this decision was to support the achievement of better outcomes for children with disabilities. This was based on evidence that children with a disability benefit from starting school with their peers once they have access to high-quality and inclusive primary school education. Likewise, they benefit from becoming teenagers with their peers and transitioning to secondary school with them.

The decision was also taken in the context of, and in conjunction with, the introduction of a full two years of **ECCE** provision with effect from September 2018, and the introduction of **AIM** supports. In effect, the view taken at the time was that availability of a full second year of **ECCE** and the **AIM** supports in place significantly exceeded the provision available through the granting of the overage exemption as introduced at the outset of the **ECCE** programme in 2010.

The decision, which was intended to represent the best interests of children, and which was taken for no other reason, was signalled a year in advance. The decision was made in close collaboration with members of the **AIM** cross-sectoral implementation group, including representatives from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), the National Disability Authority, the HSE, representatives of parents of children with special needs and a representative of early years providers.

There was broad agreement that, in light of the developments in free preschool education and the supports in place for children in primary schools, the overage exemption would no longer support the policy aim that children should transition to primary school with their peers. The decision acknowledged the supports provided by the relevant primary school, the NCSE and other bodies, as required. However, it is now acknowledged that the communication of the rationale for the decision was lacking and that further consultation with parents was required. To this end, the Minister of Children and Youth Affairs paused the proposed change to allow for a wider consultation with parents of children with disabilities and special needs.

## Consultation process

This consultation process, which is being led jointly by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills, with the assistance of the National Disability Authority, involves a number of steps, some of which have been completed, including:

- Review of relevant literature and policy
- Review of existing data on overage exemptions, including trends in applications and approvals
- Profile of children currently in receipt of overage exemptions
- Review of existing data and trends in school starting age
- Identification of options for managing exemptions going forward (including the criteria and application, appraisal and appeals processes) and consideration of the impact of each option identified for:
  - Children and families
  - Pre-schools and schools (including practitioners and teachers)
  - The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (and its respective Agencies, policies and programmes)
  - The Department of Education and Skills (and its respective Agencies, policies and programmes). This step will be led by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills
- Development, testing and issuing of a series of questions for parents of children with disabilities and preparation of a report on the results
- Identification of key stakeholders (including parents) for consultation
- Facilitation of an Open Policy Debate with these stakeholders in conjunction with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills.

### **Next steps**

The National Disability Authority will compile a report of the evidence, the findings of the survey, and findings of the Open Policy Debate for consideration by both Departments by end June 2018.

Following receipt of this report, the two Departments will consider the outcome and prepare policy proposals for the two Ministers.

Both Departments are very grateful to the National Disability Authority (for its assistance in managing this process.

**Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Department of  
Education and Skills**

**Open Policy Debate**

**Future options for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)  
overage exemptions**

**Monday, 28th May 2018**

**Mansion House Roundroom, Dawson Street, Dublin 2**

**Morning session**

09.30	Registration	Department of Children and Youth Affairs Staff
10.00	Welcome/Housekeeping	Chair
10.10	Opening address	Minister Zappone
10.20	Intro to context presentations	Chair
10.25	Presentation – NDA	Siobhan Barron
10.35	Presentation - AIM	Toby Wolfe
10.45	Presentation - Department of Education and Skills	Jim Mulkerrins
10.55	Introduction to first group session	Caroline McCamley
11.00	Table discussion	
12.00	Table discussion feedback	
12.30	<b>Lunch</b>	

### **Afternoon Session**

1.30	Introduction to afternoon session	Chair
1.35	Introduction to second group discussion	Caroline McCamley
1.40	Table discussion	
2.45 –	Table discussion feedback	
3.15 –	Panel reflections on consultation	
3.35 –	Final brief open discussion	
3.50– 4:00	Closing remarks	

## Appendix 4.2: Reports from table discussions

### Reports from table discussions

The discussions during the Open Policy Debate took place at mixed participant tables, with semi-structured questions to initiate the discussion. Each group reported a summary of the key topics and points discussed and the priorities, together with ideas and solutions to many of the issues raised.

#### Morning session

**Topic:** What are the pros and cons of the system of overage exemption?

- What were the pros and cons of the system when **ECCE** provision was 1 year?
- Have these changed now that standard **ECCE** provision is 2 years, with **AIM** supports available?
- Are there consequences of having a wide age range in an early years setting?
- Are the criteria for applying correct and is this system working?
- What are the downstream effects, if any, of exemptions (that is. when the children progress through the education system, primary and secondary)?
- Are transition mechanisms adequate?

#### Afternoon session

**Topic:** Having regard to the need for age rules in the **ECCE** scheme and the legal requirement to be in school by age 6, and taking the two programme years of **ECCE** provision as a given, what is the optimum structure in **ECCE** to address the range of issues identified in the morning?

- Three example models are being displayed to inform the conversation. These are not intended as proposals and other variations / models are welcome, which tables may fill in at 'Model D'. **(See Appendix 4.3)**
- How beneficial is it for children to progress through the education system with peers or are there any downsides?
- What, if any, changes are required to the transition process to facilitate supporting parents in their choices?
- How do we best deal with children whose additional needs arise after starting in **ECCE**?
- What messaging needs to take place with parents, early years practitioners and other stakeholders in order to increase awareness of all scheme details?

## Table I

**Facilitator**            **Caroline McCamley**  
**Note taker**            **Deirdre Hanratty**

### **Morning session**

#### **Current System: Positives**

- Makes early years affordable
- Children can start journey into lifelong learning
- Positive for children with additional needs
- Continuity of **Aistear** programme
- Can identify needs earlier
- Link between early years and primary school
- The fact that it's a universal programme
- Extra year in pre-school more inclusive
- Inclusion
- Holistic and strength-based
- Interagency work happening more
- Practitioners feeling more supported

#### **Current System: Negatives**

- Great links with some pre-schools – not all
- Pre-schools that are known to be inclusive get overwhelmed
- **ECCE** session of three hours is too short
- Some pre-schools turn away parents of children with special needs
- Training needed to help pre-schools be more inclusive
- Training is outside of work hours
- Training hubs required
- Training less available in rural areas
- Early Starts don't have **AIM** supports
- Equal access to Early Start is required (that is, **AIM** supports will allow this)
- If child is refused a place in a pre-school there is no legislation to support that family in getting a place

- Children should be able to access their local pre-school
- Inclusivity and parents
- Lack of knowledge on **AIM**
- Should be mandatory training for managers
- Some managers don't want to become employers and employ staff (as they would have to if child had Level 7 **AIM** supports)

### **Overage exemptions**

- **ECCE** upper age should bring child up to 6 years
- Some children with additional needs can only attend **ECCE** part-time (due to attending Cheeverstown or other services) presenting a difficulty for services in offering shared places
- September – December children are too young going into primary school
- Children now starting school later
- Some primary schools have a minimum starting age leaving some children with no place after completing pre-school
- Misunderstanding on what play-based learning is
- Good transitions happen when primary school teachers visit child's pre-school
- Early Intervention Team only goes up to 5 years and therefore the child is losing out
- Continuity of child's care team is required through to primary school
- Should be an overlap when the child transitions to primary school – for example, keep the same care team (Early Intervention Team) until the Christmas after the child begins primary school
- Continuity of supports
- More joined-up thinking required

### **Consequences of overage exemptions**

- Supports are stopped for children once they turn 18 years of age and they might still be in school by then
- Some parents might find difficulty getting a school place after holding their child back
- Are better resources required in schools to reduce fear of transitioning?
- Should have passports for primary schools

- Some children who move here from other countries (where school start age is 7) are then placed in junior infants at that age

### **Criteria for overage exemptions**

- Assessments have a cost
- Overage exemption could be linked to **AIM** profile
- Can **ECCE** year be split over two years? For example, 2 days for 1 year and 3 days for the next

### **Priority issues from the table**

- Inconsistencies in how it's set up
- System should be flexible in terms of when the child moves on to primary school
- Links between pre-school and primary school should be set up
- Training
- Supports continuing from pre-school through to primary school
- Increase knowledge of **AIM**
- **Aistear**
- Importance of transition to primary school

### **Afternoon session**

#### **Issues and solutions, or options suggested**

- **AIM** versus SNA
- Using **AIM** person for transition into primary school
- Wording needs to change
- One to one model has evolved
- Pre-school support/classroom assistant
- System should be consistent right through
- SNA is one part of support plan
- Pre-school support is for one child versus **AIM** model for all children
- SNA there to look after child's care need

### **Age of 6**

- Child should be allowed continue pre-school if they turn 6 during that year

- Should be a two year lead-in before transition (August to December born children)
- 2 years 8 months age is low

### **Transition to school**

- Communication should be structured between clinician/Special Educational Needs Organiser
- Plan could be in place by child's second year of pre-school
- **AIM** transition plan
- Home-school liaison officers visit some pre-schools in January before child begins primary school
- Psychologist reports can be vague

### **“Special Education Needs” term**

- “Diversity” is a more inclusive term
- Additional support worker in junior infants
- Allocation of resources in primary school

### **Aistear**

- Application of **Aistear** should be more consistent and integrated
- Flexibility of curriculum so it can be adapted for the group

### **Early Start programme**

- Anomaly
- **AIM** supports needed
- Enrolment policies inconsistent

### **Training and capacity building**

- Learning and development
- In-service training
- Local training hubs
- Funded training days
- Inclusion officer ratios – more required for services

### **Communication to parents/providers**

- Information and explanations needed
- Formal presentations and protocols
- Use of podcasts/videos
- Audio-visual communication
- Timeline
- Lack of knowledge among parents of primary school supports
- Issue around early and late diagnosis
- Greater link between agencies needed

### **Inclusive segregation**

- Inconsistent
- Whole centre should be inclusive – for example, sensory rooms can be utilised by all children
- Understanding needed on additional person in the room versus SNA

### **Observations on the exemption issue and the scenarios set out in the table**

- Two intakes doesn't work
- New lower age – parents of children born January to March very unhappy
- Level of flexibility needed
- Possibility that those who start at the lower end of the age range could be too young to get a primary school place when they finish
- Co-ordination needed with primary schools to enrolment age

### **Priority issues from the table**

- Transitions to primary school
- Upper and lower age limits
- **Early Start** programme anomalies
- Training
- Knowledge/communication

## Table 2

Facilitator **Kathryn O’Riordan**

Note taker **Aoife O’Flaherty**

### Morning session

#### Current System: Positives

- When **ECCE** was 1 year only, overage exemption meant splitting the provision between 2 years – difficult to provide for pre-**AIM**
- **AIM** enables childcare providers to engage with parents
- Diagnosis not necessary to avail of **AIM** – something many parents are unaware of
- Need to focus on reaching aims and goals
- **LINC** is vital to support services with how to support parents and children
- **AIM** works directly in pre-school settings and doesn’t need to wait for diagnosis
- Eligibility date always needed
- 1:1 ratio quite high in cases of children with disabilities – **AIM** positive to reduce ratio
- Impossible to “fix” everything – different people have different perspectives

#### Current System: Negatives

- Strain on local resources when **ECCE** increased to two years
- Unequal level of **ECCE** depending on date of birth (in the past)
- Three entry points difficult for providers
- Not all children will fit into full two years depending on primary school start date
- **Note** Pre-school readiness – some children won’t be ready at 2 years and 8 months. Would need to avail of 2 years (at a later/older age) – delay start of **ECCE**
- Looking for extra year because can’t get place in ASD primary school class
- Parents need to choose between **ECCE** and Home Tuition – **ECCE** sometimes the more popular choice

- Educational passport re child's interests between primary and secondary school – introduce between pre-school and primary school
- **AIM** still isn't known to everyone
- A need to stay in pre-school to remain eligible for other supports (for example, St Michael's House)
- Not enough information for service providers
- Delay between child starting **ECCE** and accessing their need for **AIM** (up to 3 months)
- Different situations and approaches indifferent areas throughout the country

### Other Issues

- Need to identify needs and resources for the child going from pre-school to primary school – not just strengths and weaknesses
- Under pressure to identify resource hours without formal diagnosis
- Huge waiting lists for assessment of needs
- Parents are fearful to make contact with primary schools about additional needs in case it negatively affects getting a place (in reality this is not the case)
- It takes two years to build on and develop a child's strengths
- Training and upskilling of workforce to develop inclusion
- In primary schools, class sizes can be too big in order to have an SNA in a class
- Junior infants classes need more resources
- Not enough training for early years services outside of **LINC**
- Early years training goes outside of hours
- Needs transition piece between pre-school and primary school
- First five years are so important – investment in future
- Need a pathway for children with disabilities that are not visible
- Services need support and encouragement to plan
- Services can feel that they won't be able to manage and support a child with, for example, a severe allergy

## Afternoon session

### Issues and solutions, or options suggested

- Age cut off points always a problem
- Not every service understands **AIM**
- Why are children getting exemptions but not **AIM**?
- Needs to be upper age limit
- Inconsistencies between what different specialists recommend
- More collaboration needed between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills
- Challenge predicting when child should start school
- Pre-school, national school, **AIM**, National Council for Curriculum Assessment, etc. workforce should be trained together
- **Aistear** into primary school
- How to transition from 1:8 ratio to 1:28 – more collaboration needed on transition
- Uniform curriculum between preschool and infants needed
- Post primary level still catching up with the level of primary school resources
- Technology negatively affecting language skills of children. Can't express themselves
- More Speech and Language intervention is needed in comparison to 15 years ago
- More Occupational Therapy needed in society – children's movement is lower
- Different areas have different supports available
- Early years training done on the providers own time and money
- Early years sector is in a staff crisis
- Staff in pre-schools moving into primary school education (for example, SNAs) – much more attractive sector for pay, holidays, etc.
- Provide parents with educational training? They are the primary educator
- Can be a lot of pressure on parents
- No support for children in services who are too young for **AIM**

- Parents can be reluctant to apply for supports – don't want to label the child
- No support outside of **ECCE**, for example, summer holidays and those under 3
- Should be getting to the child as early as possible – not just when they turn **ECCE** eligible
- Communication needed so parents understand **AIM**
- Difficult to link with local schools
- Give parents contact details for Special Educational Needs Organisers , etc. as early as possible
- Pre-schools differ so much that it's difficult for primary schools to liaise
- **Note:** Transition piece – evidence and outcome based – pass on useful info around exactly what supports will be needed – snapshot of child's progression identifies what skills need to be worked on
- Should be standardised – parents' consent, positive language
- Child's profile must be accurate, parent might not agree but they need to sign off on it – need to come to an agreement with the parent – very challenging
- Specialist placements need for certain primary placements – parents holding child in **ECCE** to enable getting a diagnosis so they can get their desired primary placement
- Can't access certain supports without a diagnosis

**Observations on the exemption issue and the scenarios set out in the table**

- Scenario C – can't keep places until January – difficult to plan
- **Aistear** enables working with all ages
- Lack of capacity with more than one start date
- If a child starts before any additional need is apparent and then isn't ready for primary school after two years **ECCE** they would still need an exemption – can they still apply for an additional year of funding?
- Preferred Option B

### Table 3

**Facilitator Eimear Carron**

**Note Taker Aoife Calnan**

**Morning session**

#### **Current System positives**

- **ECCE** is beneficial for preparing children for Primary school
- **ECCE** also helps schools to be more ready for new entrants
- **AIM** programme is very beneficial

#### **Current system negatives**

- The age of entry is not inclusive enough
- The over-age exemption criteria are not broad enough to cover the unique and varying needs of children. Needs to be more case dependent
- Not enough support for parents following diagnosis of a child
- Not sufficient accessible information for parents on education options for their child with special needs
- The transition of children in **AIM** programme from pre-school to primary school is not fluid enough-more information sharing between both organisations is needed
- Children not progressing with peers

#### **Other issues**

- Parents may be requesting over age exemptions to keep children in pre-school longer as they fear there may not be the correct support available for their child in primary school
- Possibility of **AIM** supports to extend beyond the 3 hours **ECCE** time for those children in full-time childcare
- **Aistear** curriculum needs to be used as a teaching tool in more schools
- A transition phase between pre-school and primary school would be useful
- Concerns that extending **ECCE** beyond 2 years for a child may be counter-productive as their learning and development may not progress

#### **Priority issues from the table**

- Transitioning of children from **ECCE** and **AIM** to primary school is not streamlined enough. More communication is needed between all parties that is, parents, professionals, pre-school providers and primary school teachers. Make this process mandatory

- Better supports for children with special needs in primary schools to allay fears of parent Information for parents to be made more easily available

## **Afternoon session**

### **Issues**

- Upper age of **ECCE** to be increased above 5yrs 6 mths
- Not enough clarity on what over-age exemption means and processes/ rules
- Not enough communication between stakeholders and parents
- Transition from preschool to primary not streamlined
- Concerns around the practicalities within the primary school start age in relation to- ratios; school readiness; toilet training/changing facilities
- Current primary school start age is 4.5yrs to 5yrs

### **Solutions/options**

- Have more flexibility around over age exemptions but within legal parameters
- Inform parents of benefit of 2 years of **ECCE** to keep school start age higher
- DEIS schools to be used as a model for transition
- Ensure that child's best interest is at heart
- Parents to be more aware of what school 'readiness' means so they can be more confident about progressing a child
- Parents to be made aware of the supports available to their children earlier in the year of primary school enrolment
- Creating a new post to specifically deal with the coordination of transition

### **Observations on exemption issue and table scenarios**

- Start/end dates can be restrictive-children should be able to start when ready
- Start date of January can result in parents paying preschool fees for 9 months

### **Priority issues**

- Better communication between preschool providers and primary schools to aid transition of child
- More clarity for parents regarding school readiness to ensure the child's best interest at heart
- Ensure correct supports are in place for a child before transitioning to primary school
- Easy access for parents to information on the most appropriate supports available to a child throughout their school years

## Table 4

Facilitator **Oonagh Fleming**

Note taker **Jamie Kennedy**

### Morning session

#### Current System - Positives

- **ECCE** gives children with additional needs access to a mainstream educational setting where they would have been previously excluded.
- Delayed / deferred start of **ECCE** can be useful for children who are not yet ready to progress. Issue is children who miss programme entry dates (and provider capacity)

#### Negatives

- Split placements for children with additional needs to attend specialist service (not related to overage)
- Lack of clarification around the overage exemption – needs clear explanation on what it is that the child is going to be exempt from.
  - Is the child exempt from starting school at 6 years
  - Is the child exempt of the **ECCE** programme rules?
- School enrolment and availability can dictate children applying for an exemption
- Children with additional needs may not be ready for preschool at programme entry age – and won't get full complement of **ECCE** if they do not benefit from an overage exemption. Parents may feel that they are not getting their full entitlement.
- Lack of spaces (capacity) – operators may not have the capacity to allow for an exemption.
- Specialist preschool option not readily available nationwide
  - Table felt that it is best if a mainstream provider can provide the supports for a child with additional needs if they can facilitate
  - **AIM** national coverage has benefits over specialist provider/services
- Splitting programme years causes issues
- Children with additional needs identified but not yet diagnosed.
- Application process for exemption is difficult for parents
- Recommendation letter from specialists

- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment report highlights issues with transition and capacity
- Some parents are reluctant to enter **AIM** programme based on the terminology/ stigma around the word disability.

### **Other issues**

- Transition between preschool and school – no formal procedure
  - National Council for Curriculum and Assessment advice and guidelines
- A facility needs to be put in place to support older children (who have had an exemption) who will therefore finish school later.
- Distinct lack of a whole of government plan for entire educational journey (hiccups/glitches) School carrying on from **AIM**
- SNA provision may change between preschool and school - The need for a diagnosis in school can be a barrier – loss of SNA
  - Change of system for parents – new application process etc
- There is a need for a linked-up system from preschool to 3<sup>rd</sup> level (whole life)
  - Difficulty of multi-system process highlighted over and again. (for children and parents)
  - Parents may not be the best arbitrator for the child's needs. Fears and emotions may cloud their judgement. Difficulty and upset can be caused by change – moving out of the comfort zone of a system the parents know, understand and that they find to be working for the child to an alien system with different processes

### **Priority issues from the table**

- Clarify on overage exemption
- Seamless journey of transition
- Concerns of capacity in the sector
- Parents' choice (76 weeks)
  - Delayed start
- Incongruity of 2 models of support – **AIM** versus the school system

## Afternoon session

### Priority issues from the table

- Flexibility – to extend time for child to remain in **ECCE**
- Worry around assessments etc
- Support in transition to completely different systems
  - Seamless – should have same criteria to apply
  - Communication to parents (overarching)
  - Less assessment
- Dependency on capacity issues for entry and exit pathways
  - Suitable access to match needs (over 3 years)
- Research and information needs to be conducted and collected from wide ranging perspectives.
- Focus on the quality of the services offered, requiring monitoring and reporting
- Inclusion – quality inclusion for children with additional needs
- Why parents want an exemption and address it

### Observations on the exemption issue and the scenarios set out in the table

Option/Senario B was highlighted as the most appealing however, HSE rep noted that from a health care position it is not the idea scenario. An issue was raised that Early Intervention Team ends at 5.

### Issues, and solutions or options suggested

- Integration does not always equal inclusion. (Odd one out situation)
- Continuity of relationships – good grounding (security or routine)
- Minimise the stigma of being “kept back”
- Parents have to understand that they have the choice with entry/ exit
  - Option to have 2 years
- Schools are not fully aware of early years programmes and providers or feeder services – lack of mutual understanding
- School / preschool relationships – parents should see it as a linked up service rather than two distinct processes

- Transportation can be an issue for children with additional need
- Mixed age rooms/ groups – preferred choice for many
  - Older children display leadership
  - Social development
  - Younger children learn from older
- Early intervention team – up to 6 yrs
  - Big change for a child if they to transition between preschool and school during the same period that they lose the Early Intervention Team
  - Often need the Early Intervention team to support them in their transition to school
- Difficulty to get suitable qualified person who fits the hours offered etc
- Sector struggles to find suitably qualified persons anyway – more so for less than full time hours

## Table 5

Facilitator **Mary Robb**

Note taker **Sylvia Cox**

### Morning session

#### Flexibility

One of the major discussions of the morning was around flexibility within the scheme. The main points put across were:

- Age Restriction- the limit of 5 years and 6 months seemed to be a problem
- Age Restriction- on babies who were born prematurely, seem to be missing out because of their birth date
- Pro Rata -, Parents feel that the option of Pro Rata is gone, for example, if their child had special/additional needs and was unable to avail of the full entitlement of 5 days per week, they put forward that they can still avail of the pro-rata option over 2 years and receive a 3<sup>rd</sup> year of **ECCE** for whatever no. of days a child can do. The child would in fact still only have availed of 2 years of **ECCE** in total albeit over a 3 programme year period
- Parents feel that the option of one intake of school start in September is limited
- Parents feel that they should be able to choose what year to send their child to pre-school and still avail of the 2 year programme before reaching the age of 6, with some parents still suggesting that if their child is still within the age limit having availed of the full 2 years, they feel they should be entitled to another year of **ECCE**. For example, if a parent sent their child to pre-school at the age of 2 years 8 months, they could avail of 3 years of **ECCE** and still be within the age range of starting school
- Administration: this should not be an issue for parents when choosing when to send their child to pre-school

#### AIM

The timeline of an **AIM** Assessment was discussed. It seems that a clearer more defined process should be put in order around the timeline to apply for **AIM**, an for example, given was that more time should be given in order to hire special/additional staff

The functionality and process of **AIM** and the interactions with Early Years was discussed

## **Communications**

Communications among all stakeholders seems to be becoming an issue. Some of the suggestions around communication were:

- There should be more awareness and understanding especially around the smaller services
- There should be a communications strategy between the City/County Childcare Committees and providers
- More communication to parents around how and when to apply for **AIM** in order that there is sufficient time for assessment etc.
- There should be clearer definitions around the difference between observation and assessment within **AIM**

## **Issues discussed**

- Readiness of children to commence Primary school at age 4
- The consequence of having a wider age range, for example, not enough places to accommodate more children
- Segregated specialist pre-schools
- Integration is being missed – “Inclusive Segregation”
- Difficult to balance the different age ranges of children, for example, literacy levels across a broad age range/toilet training etc.

A suggestion was made that maybe the guidelines/enrolment policies of individual services or a standard one could be looked at

## **Issues arising around the overage exemptions**

Should be clearer guidelines on the overage exemptions

- When to apply
- How to decide when a child is ready?
- Age of Special School Sector – noting that the age limit of a Special Needs School doesn't extend beyond 18 years of age
- There could be a much older child with their peers, is this a good idea?

A discussion arose as to whether when deciding to send a child to school, could it be considered if children are socially and academically ready rather than the age of the child.

## Training

There was a lot of discussion around the issue of training and staffing, for example,

- The difference between the qualifications of SNA's and pre-school workers
- Could there be an overview of the pre-school/school curriculum in relation to **Siolta/Aistear** etc.
- Resources for transitioning from Pre-school to Primary school, for example, should speech and language reports be sent to the Primary school prior to child starting school
- Training staff

## Afternoon session

### Solutions

There was a discussion around the issue of the overage exemptions and a few issues were highlighted as possible ways of solving some of the issues surrounding the overage exemptions.

- Sufficient Flexibility – Is there a need for exemptions at all, should a parent not be able to choose which 2 years they send their child to pre-school provided they are in Primary school by the age of 6 years
- Should the Department of Children and Youth Affairs/Department of Education look at the idea of making pre-schools a recognised level of Education
- Communication: between the service provider and the parent needs to be looked at in order to speed up the application process for supports. Why is it taking so long for supports to be approved for children
- Administration: If another year of **ECCE** was approved, who would support it? Should an early educator be involved in the transition period or a specialist be involved in the development assessment?

### **Other Solutions could be:**

- More administration supports , for example,if a child has already been assessed in pre-school as having a special/additional needs , such as, speech and language, could there not be some sort of IT Solution (Online Approval System – one point of contact that everyone can access), whereby a child is given a unique number, that a number of services/schools can access and use in order to save time when trying to access additional supports?
- Pilot Occupational/Speech Therapy for schools
- More communication with parents on what type of guides are available from ,for example, NCSE regarding transitioning to school etc.
- Should we start looking at automatically sending parents information and guides in relation to a child's date of birth
- School readiness -should there be a consultation process around this? One solution mentioned was that schools should be ready rather than the child.
- Research on Children who attend Mainstream to Special Needs School – Has there been any previous research been done
- Look at the child's needs – what's best for the child with respect to local services
  - Mainstream or Special School – look at pressure on parents to send children to a mainstream school, they could be more discussion with Parents along with more supports for parents
  - Child's Self Esteem
  - Another pre-school year?

### **Other Issues surrounding an extra year of pre-school**

- Acceptance from parents in relation to a child with special/additional needs

### **Some Example Solutions**

Minimum start age should be an 18 month period

- Extend the age range to 2 years 8 months – 3 years 11 months
- Extra SNA's/Resources in Primary Schools
- Maybe call it a different scheme
- Transition period of a couple of years

## Table 6

Facilitator **Gwen Doyle**

Note taker **Cathy Mohan**

### Morning session

- **Current System Positives:** The benefits of early intervention can be seen
- Children don't have to start school at a very early age
- Parents can assess at the time if their child is ready to start school. The exemption gives the option to decide when to send a child to school having seen how their child has progressed in pre-school
- Could split one year's **ECCE** over a two year period
- The numbers availing of the exemption are very low; only 500 children avail of it annually
- As the scheme exists only fifty children started school over the age of six years
- There are no negatives for a child with special needs starting school over the age of six years

### Current System Negatives

- Still very boundary driven
- From an administrative point of view the new one entry point instead of the current three separate entry points would be easier to manage

### Other issues

- The new system will not be equally accessible or equitable
- Timing is too narrowly defined and too restrictive
- Under the new system children could be starting school at a very young age  
After receiving two years **ECCE** children could be four years and eight months starting school
- Children who are not suitable to start at two years and eight months may not get the full two years **ECCE**
- If parents decide to keep their child in pre-school for a third year they will not get **ECCE**, they would have to fund it themselves and after having two years of **ECCE** with **AIM** supports the child would then have one year without their previous supports
- Is there current data available on children who have availed of the exemption?

- The system should be tested for much longer before getting rid of the exemption
- Because of the rules changing there will be a cohort of parents who will have been given wrong information (even though it would have been correct at the time that they were given the information)
- How can we review something that is still in motion? There should be a lived in experience before any decisions are made
- Let the new **ECCE** model roll out and still keep the exemption. Research all of the implications and then decide each case on its own merit
- Who communicates with the parents so they can understand the full impact/ get the full picture? City/County Childcare Committees previously communicated with the parents but now it appears that it is mainly down to the provider to communicate with parents.
- The mixture of supports available is confusing for example, **ECCE, AIM, Home Tuition**. They appear to be uncoordinated and overlapping
- Is there data collection and evaluation available on the impact on a child who has availed of the over age exemption and what were the benefits?
- Legislation that a child must attend school at six years is very unclear. The legislation needs to be clarified
- Pre-school providers want the child to be ready for school and they work with the child on their readiness for school
- If there is no exemption the primary school will have to be able to provide the child with the supports required to deal with the transition from pre-school to primary school

### **Priority Issues from the table**

- Keep parents informed and respected
- There is too much change in too short a time. There is not enough time to see how everything rolls out. Change is welcome but it should not be rushed and it should be tested to see how it is working
- Because of so much change communication/information between the relevant organisations may not be up to date
- The child's readiness has to be acknowledged because a child's eligibility may not be the same as a child's readiness
- Not only should the child's readiness for school be acknowledged but it is also important to acknowledge the school's readiness for the child

## **Afternoon session Issues and solutions or options suggested**

- **Issue: Communication between various organisations**
- **Solution:** There should be one single point of contact to gain access to all information. A central agency or a role or a “go to” contact should be created to communicate with parents
  - There should be clear information from Department of Children and Youth Affairs, HSE, Children and Young People’s Services Committees, and NCSE and there should be consistency and uniformity in all this information
  - Contact details should be shared between all organisations perhaps having a regular Forum where this could be done
  - There should be a map of all services available. A working group might be needed to create this map
  - Parameters should be clearly defined.
  - There should be a consistent curriculum approach from pre-school to primary school (for example, **Aistear**)
- **Issue: Pre-school providers should link in with primary schools. If there is no longer an over age exemption can primary schools provide the required curriculum for children with special needs?**
- **Solution:** There should be a national policy to deal with the transition from pre-school to primary school. (There is currently a National Council for Curriculum and Assessment pilot for this)
- **Issue: Over age exemption has to be re-introduced**
- **Solution:** There needs to be a lead-in time if there are going to be changes. It has to be acknowledged that families plan the options available for their child with the information that is available to them at the time. Parents cannot always make an informed decision on future options that they may have for their child as they cannot be sure at what rate their child will progress
- **Issue: Providers need to have access to the criteria for over age exemptions and AIM. There are no current guidelines available for over age exemptions**

- **Solution:** Information has to out there readily available and accessible. The information should be on a website. It has to be acknowledged that providers are qualified professionals
- **Issue: The child should be central to everything. The child has to be the main focus**
- **Solution:** Continue to have flexibility in **ECCE** over age exemption. The readiness of the individual child is the main thing that has to be considered

### **Observations on the exemption issue and the scenarios set out in the table**

- Table six did not discuss the scenarios at the table. It was felt that their discussion covered most of the issues

### **Priority Issues from the table**

- Would extending the over age exemption impact on the number of pre-school places that are available?
- Decisions to grant an over age exemption should be led by the individual needs of the child not diagnosis led
- The primary school approach on training will have to be re-examined. **Aistear** should be a huge part of the child's education. There would be no need for over age exemptions if the primary school was ready for the child and if the school was provided with the required supports. The child must be ready for primary school but the school must be ready for the child
- Department of Education and Skills policy/legislation will have to be revised /reviewed
- Parents will not under any circumstances want to send their child to school unless they feel that their child is ready. They will wait until the child is ready even if they have to pay for the third year in pre-school themselves but this would lead to the child not receiving the intensive supports that he/she had previously received for example, **AIM**
- Leave the exemption in place for two **ECCE** years on a pilot basis and see how it rolls out. Monitor the progress of the children who have availed of the over age exemption

## Table 7

**Facilitator: Orla Cooper**

**Note taker: Nicole McMahon**

### **Morning session**

#### **Current system: Positives**

- In 2010 – there were no national supports/interventions. Parents also struggled financially
- The message to parents was that 1 year was sufficient and that if 2 years were required it implied that the child had greater needs
- While the application process was fairly straightforward (in that the exemption was generally granted), it was noted that the criteria wasn't very clear (that is, there were no clear guidelines) and that greater transparency was needed. Experience of children with similar needs having different success when applying for overage exemption
- Wide age range between the children due to expansion of **ECCE**
  - Seen as both positive and negative
  - Perception that if the service is large it is fine, as you can have different rooms allocated to the different age ranges. May be harder for smaller services
  - Younger children can learn from the older children. Though equally, it was noted, that there is the potential for regression if the older children start to imitate the younger ones
  - Peers doesn't necessarily mean age – could be peers on a developmental level

#### **Other issues**

- **ECCE** age eligibility frequently changing – goalposts keep changing
- **AIM** – positive feedback generally, though not without issues
  - Acknowledgement that **AIM** is in the early stages
  - Not all services (or parents) know how to apply for **AIM**
  - HSE need to get in earlier-early intervention is key
  - Level 4 – problem with the use of the word 'disability' (inappropriate) especially where there is no diagnosis

- Parents may have difficulty accepting that their child may have additional needs
  - It was suggested that if the overage exemption was not based on diagnosis (that is if it was universal), this wouldn't be a problem
- **Transition between preschool and primary school is not structured**
  - No connect between **AIM** supports and those provided in primary
  - The transition will always be harder for some children over others, so there is a need for transition supports to be available
  - New resource allocation model for schools should include the **AIM** resources that a child has availed of
  - Good for a child to be a little bit older going into primary school but to be mindful of too wide an age gap
    - School readiness – socially, not just academically
    - Better to be a year older than go to school when not ready
- **Financial implications** for a service if they take on a child who is not eligible for **ECCE** (if they are unable to obtain an overage exemption)
  - For example, commercial rates, as the service will no longer be providing **ECCE** only
- Issues for service providers
  - **Staffing** – turnover of staff, as it is a 38 week programme, and issues re pay and conditions

#### Priority issues from the table

- Age limits for **ECCE** – If they are to stay in place then the overage exemption is a necessity (essential)
- Lack of clear Information
- Transition from preschool to primary school
- Early Intervention is critical – it is too delayed

## **Afternoon session**

### **Issues, and solutions or options suggested**

- **Age limits for ECCE are too restrictive**
  - To remove the age limits, on the proviso that the child will be in school by age 6
  - Parental choice as to when the child avails of the two years.
  - Choice to delay start but also to ensure that Early Intervention is brought in in a timely manner
  - If a child starts **ECCE** later, then early intervention outside the pre-school setting is vital
  
- **Transition to primary school**
  - Possibility of allowing children to start primary school in June to ease the transition, depending on their month of birth.
  - Better cooperation between all interested parties (parents, preschool and the primary school)
  - NCSE information sessions, which are facilitated by the HSE are not rolled out across the country and should be. Good example of collaborative working.
  - There should be a structured, national transition process in place (such as the passport) that takes into account the amount of time it takes to implement
  - There could also be a transition process in place for children entering pre-school
  
- **Specialist Training**
  - Specialist to provide training to the childcare provider to cater for the child's specific needs - that a plan would be put in place
  
- **AIM**
  - Child to be fully supported for the full two years
  - For AIM team to interact directly with parents in providing information (the AIM website was deemed not user-friendly for parents)
  - LINC needs to be expanded to cater for more people-**LINC**-trained staff could be best placed to liaise with parents on supports available
  - Need for structures/supports for children who cannot attend preschool for a variety of reasons

- **Lack of clear information**

- Parents reliant on service providers to provide information
- More information should be made available. Parents may incorrectly assume that due to their child's needs they would not be accommodated in pre-school
- Messaging needs to be about inclusion as it benefits everyone

**Observations on the exemption issue and the scenarios set out in the table**

- Leave as is
  - That a child can avail of an overage exemption if required, with Early Intervention critical
  - For a child that has only availed of 1.5 years of **ECCE** (those eligible for 61 weeks under the current rules), to be allowed avail of an overage exemption, where a special/additional need exists
- Supports should be seamless, shouldn't be a battle
- Need for structures not to be dependent on diagnosis
- Need for transparent criteria/guidelines for overage exemptions
- IF (as a last resort), the overage exemption is removed, then there should be a subsidy for parents to maintain their child in preschool for another year, with **AIM** supports continuing
- There are children who do not attend pre-school and who also require supports and intervention
- Whatever action(s) are taken, they should be child lead and not system lead (shouldn't set a child up to fail)

**Priority issues from the table**

- Same as the morning session
  - Age limits for **ECCE** – If they are to stay in place then the overage exemption is a necessity (essential)
  - Lack of clear Information-communication is key
  - Transition from preschool to primary school
  - Early Intervention needs to be brought in sooner – too delayed

## Table 8

**Facilitator Louise Fitzpatrick**

**Note taker Alan Padden**

### **Morning session**

#### **Pros and cons of 1 year ECCE offer**

##### **Positives**

- Offers structured routine to children that need it
- Parents that were previously unable to send children due to the cost were now in a position to avail of the free service
- Enables children to develop their language and social skills
- Has led to an increase in standards in services as a result of training and support and inspections
- A child with a disability could spread their 1 year over a 2 year time frame, this compensated for missing out on time due to other appointments

##### **Negatives**

- The previous 1 year system was ad hoc depending on where you lived, for example you might have been able to enter the scheme in January if a place was available with a provider near you
- If a parent could afford a 2<sup>nd</sup> year, they could pay but this represented an inequity
- Disadvantaged children would have needed the extra year, but this was unavailable to them

##### **Other issues**

#### **How have things changed? – 2 year process**

- Gives children more time to children in pre-school
- Special schools do not avail of **AIM**
- It was noted that there is a disparity with other related supports between the age of children at entry and exit points
- There was concern that many children could be forced to start school at 4 years and 8 months, regardless of school readiness, due to the only entry point which is dictated by the child's date of birth. – no extension available for children with disabilities
- Before **AIM** was introduced, children were splitting their time between special school and ECCE, now some children are doing 1 year with the HSE and could do 2 years **ECCE** if they are eligible for the overage exemption

- Now all services delivering **ECCE** have access to funding on a needs basis
- Parents are feeling rushed into making decisions about their child's future and not have a transition plan in place
- Parents feel pressured when they are unaware of what supports will be available to them and have a fear of change - 'go with what you know'
- If there is a late diagnosis of issues with a child's development this can have a knock on effect
- It was suggested that a needs based vs diagnosis based view is needed when transitioning to school
- There is a lack of supports available to help parents prepare for transition to secondary school esp. if they are on a waiting list
- More support needs to be given to preschool providers as they are often called upon to give support to parents about making decisions on transition into school
- There are concerns about the gap between HSE support and **AIM** support
- There is a need for a continuum of support from **AIM** to junior infants as there is currently a lack of protocols for NCSE and **Better Start** to engage with each other
- There is a need for the **Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill 2016** to remove any barriers that are present

### **Problems down the line**

- If a child is late starting school, this could result in them having to leave school early due to their age. ( Department of Education and Skills' responsibility ends at age 18 years, so if a child moves to second level at age 14 years they have only 4 guaranteed years of education left)
- Parents will stick to what they know if they are unaware of the supports that are available to their child
- It was thought that 3 years of pre-school may be too much for some children
- It is hard to know at 2.6 months whether a child will be ready for school 2 years later
- The child's date of birth should not dictate when they can access **ECCE**
- The wide age range in late childhood may be inappropriate as older children may imitate younger and vice versa
- It is good to transition at the same time as peers

- Education memo to schools states that all children need to progress to 1<sup>st</sup> class by age 6.5 years. A school can decide to move a child up a year without the consent of a parent
- It needs to be evident how parents can access all information available to weigh up the pros and cons of the decisions they are about to make
- Finding placements in schools and positions on waiting lists could prove problematic
- Quality of education provision is very important
- There is a need for wraparound services around family to engage with each other fully
- There is a gap around the area of family supports

### **Criteria**

- It was agreed that the criteria of date of birth was unfitting
- A professional recommendation can only be acquired if parents are in a position to financially, and if the result is not received until late in the year, a place may not be available with the service
- If the overage exemption is granted late in the year, this means the school application may also be applied for late in the year

### **Priority issues from the table**

- A transition plan for the child needs to be put in place
- Support for parents before making decisions by providing them with the full facts of what is available to them
- Proper protocols need to be established to enable interaction between agencies

### **Afternoon session**

#### **Issues, and solutions or options suggested**

- If parents decide to keep children in preschool there are knock on effects further down the line, for example the age of the child
- There is a need to change the rule in the **Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill 2016** that requires children to transfer out of senior infants at 6 years 6 months
- The minimum start age in Scenario B would align with the home tuition scheme and ASD preschool provision
- Department of Education and Skills Early Start preschools are only 1 year in duration; this should transfer to 2 years

- DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) preschools need access to **AIM** supports
- There is a need for alignment between school age supports and early intervention
- There is also a need for alignment within the HSE and HSE funded services countrywide

### **Observations on the exemption issue and the scenarios set out in the table**

- None of the scenarios will address the issues that have been raised
- Scenario B offers flexibility by starting 2 month earlier or by delaying it for a year

### **Priority issues from the table**

#### **Transition Plans**

- Resources are required for the national policy on early intervention team for children's disability network
- The Department of Education and Skills recruitment of therapists is resulting in a number of staff leaving posts within the early intervention team to take up roles in schools. This will leave these early intervention teams even more under resourced (unintended consequences)
- Implement the national policy on progressing disability services for children and young persons aged 0-18 years and paediatric care (Department of Health)

#### **Parental Support**

- Enable preschool teachers to pass on information to parents that they will need to make an informed decision about the next steps for their child (that is. the down the line consequences, their options in schools etc)
- A consequence of not implementing national policy is parents are forced to make decisions on education placements based on the availability of therapeutic supports. (child following supports rather than the supports following the child)

#### **Protocols**

- There is a need for a continuum of support from **AIM** to junior infants as there is currently a lack of protocols for NCSE and **Better Start** to engage with each other
- Build capacity in schools to work with children with disabilities starting with teacher education

## Appendix 4.3: Scenarios for addressing the overage exemption issue – a prompt to the Open Policy Debate

<b>Factors for consideration</b>	<b>Scenario A</b>	<b>Scenario B</b>	<b>Scenario C</b>	<b>Preferred optimum option from the table</b>
<b>Number of intakes</b>	Single (September)	Single (September)	Two (September or January)	
<b>Minimum start age</b>	2 years eight months to 3 years 7 months (depending on date of birth)	2 years six month to 3 years 6 months (depending on date of birth)	2 years eight months to 3 years 7 months (depending on date of birth)	
<b>Max offer</b>	Up to two programme years	Up to two programme years	Up to two programme years	
<b>Maximum / minimum school starting age</b>	4 years 8 months to five years 7 months	Four years 6 months to 5 years 11 months	Four years 6 months to 5 years 7 months	
<b>Flexibility</b>	Fixed (depending on date of birth)	Choice of which September you start	Two choices of start point	
<b>Advantages</b>	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	
<b>Disadvantages</b>	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	
<b>Overage exemption possible options</b>	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	For discussion at tables	

## Appendix 5– Parents survey questionnaire

### Personal details

In this section you will be asked some questions about the child on whose behalf you applied for an exemption to the upper age limit for the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme. **Early Childhood Care and Education**

1. What county were you living in when you applied for an exemption to the upper age limit for the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme?

2. What is your child's gender?

1. Male

2. Female

3. What age was your child when they first attended the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme? Please give your answer in years and months.

4. What is your child's current pattern of attendance in the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme?

1. **Full attendance** – that is, 3 hours per day, five days per weeks over the thirty-eight week **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme year.

2. **Part attendance** - that is, **less than 3** hours per day, five days per weeks over the thirty-eight week **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme year

5. Had your child been in any childcare arrangement outside the family home on a regular basis prior to when they first attended the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme?

1. Yes

2. No

6. If you answered 'Yes' to Question 5 above, please pick the childcare arrangement below which best describes this previous childcare arrangement:

1. Childminder

2. Mainstream Crèche / preschool

3. Special pre-school, operated by the HSE or disability service provider
4. Other special pre-school
5. Other (please specify)

At what point did you apply for an exemption to the upper age limit for the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme for your child?

1. When you first enrolled your child in the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme
  2. While your child was in their first year of the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme
  3. While your child was in their second year of the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme.
  4. I don't remember / I'm not sure
8. What is the nature of your child's primary disability upon which your application for an exemption to the upper age limit for the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme was based?
1. Intellectual disability
  2. Communication difficulty
  3. Physical disability
  4. Sensory disability
  5. Autism / ASD
  6. Behavioural issues
  7. Other (please specify)

An application for an exemption to the upper age limit to the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme must be accompanied by a letter from a relevant professional.

9. Who provided this letter in the case of your child's application?
1. Speech and Language Therapist
  2. Psychologist

3. Occupational Therapist
4. Physiotherapist
5. Hospital Doctor
6. Other (please specify)

### Information, advice and concerns

In this section you will be asked some questions about:

- Where you first heard about exemptions to the upper age limit of the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme
- Your reason/ for applying for an exemption  
Advice that you may have received about these exemptions

### Information

10. How did you first hear about exemption to the upper age limit of the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme?  
(Choose more than one option if relevant)

1. From another parent
2. From a friend, family, colleague
3. From a pre-school staff member
4. From a disability professional (Psychologist, Speech and Language Therapist, Occupational Therapist, etc)
5. From a health professional (Public Health Nurse, G.P., Hospital Doctor)
6. From an education professional (primary school teacher or school principal, Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENO))
7. On an online forum
8. Other (please specify)

### Reasons for applying for an overage exemption:

11. What were the main factors which informed your decision to apply for an exemption to the upper age limit of the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme for your child (tick all that apply)
1. I had concerns about my child's readiness for primary school
  2. I had concerns about the ability of the available primary school(s) to meet my child 's needs
  3. Other (please specify)

If you had concerns about your child's readiness for primary school, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

12. I believed that my child would have had greater difficulty **academically** in primary school without an extra year of preschool (for example, difficulty completing tasks set by teacher)  
Strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree
13. I believed that my child would have had greater difficulty **socially** in primary school without an extra year of preschool (for example, difficulty making friends).  
Strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree
14. I believed that my child would have had greater difficulty **behaviourally** in primary school without an extra year of preschool (for example, getting corrected by their teacher frequently).  
Strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree
15. If you had concerns about the ability of the available primary school(s) to meet your child's needs (compared to pre-school) please describe your concerns.

**Free text**

16. If you had concerns about the ability of the available primary school(s) to meet your child's needs (compared to pre-school) did you discuss these concerns with the primary school before applying for an exemption? For example, by talking to the primary school's class teacher or principal.
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Not sure or can't remember
17. If you wish to provide further detail about your reasons for applying for an exemption to the upper age limit of the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme on your child's behalf please do so in the space below.

**Open text**

## Advice from professionals

18. Did you discuss the potential **advantages** and **disadvantages** of your child remaining in preschool for an extra year with professionals who work in areas related to child development?

1. Yes
2. No

19. If yes, please select who you discussed the possible **advantages** and **disadvantages** of your child remaining in the **Early Childhood Care and Education** preschool programme for an additional year with from the list below.

1. Preschool staff
2. Disability professional (Psychologist, Speech and Language Therapist Occupational Therapist, etc)
3. Health professional (Public Health Nurse, Hospital Doctor)
4. Education professional (teacher, school principal, Special Education Needs Coordinator)
5. Other professional, please specify

20. Please outline the advice given to you by the professional identified above in question 19 on the potential **advantages** of your child remaining in the **Early Childhood Care and Education** preschool programme for an additional year.

**Open text**

21. Please outline the advice given to you by the professional identified above in question 19 on the potential **disadvantages** for your child remaining in the **Early Childhood Care and Education** preschool programme for an additional year.

**Open text**

## Preschool supports

In this section you will be asked some questions about whether the preschool that your child attends receives any **Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)** supports to assist your child in availing of the **ECCE** pre-school programme.

### **AIM supports**

You may be aware that from September 2016 a model of supports for preschool children with disability, called the **Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)**, was introduced. **AIM** is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme in mainstream pre-school settings and can participate fully in the pre-school curriculum alongside their peers.

**AIM** is a child centred model of supports, involving seven levels of support based on the needs of the child and the pre-school provider (for example, training of pre-school practitioners, grants for equipment, appliances and minor alterations, access to therapeutic supports etc)

22. Are you aware that **AIM** supports are available to children with disabilities participating in the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme?
  1. Yes
  2. No
  
23. Did your pre-school provider discuss applying for **AIM** supports within the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme with you?
  1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Not sure or can't remember
  
24. Did your pre-school provider apply for **AIM** supports specifically for your child (you would have had to complete the paperwork with the pre-school provider)?
  1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Not sure or can't remember
  
25. Does your pre-school provider receive any **AIM** supports specifically for your child (you would have had to complete the paperwork with the pre-school provider)?
  1. Yes
  2. No

3. Not sure

26. If you answered “Yes” to question 25 above please outline (in the space below), what **AIM** supports your preschool receives to support them in providing the **Early Childhood Care and Education** pre-school programme to your child (you would have had to complete the paperwork with the pre-school provider).

### Open text

#### Other supports

**AIM** was launched nationally in September 2016. However, some previously existing arrangements continue to operate locally, for example, local HSE or disability service providers provide supports to individual children to attend mainstream pre-schools. This could have been provided in the form of some Pre-school Special Needs Assistant hours, for example.

27. Does your child receive any support in the pre-school setting from local HSE or disability service providers?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Not sure

28. If you answered “Yes” to question 27 above please describe the support that your child receives in the pre-school setting from local HSE or disability service providers.

### Open text

#### Transitions to Primary School

29. What age will your child be in September 2018 (when they will first attend primary school)? (In years plus months).

30. When your child transitions to primary school, what type of school / class will they move to?

1. A mainstream class in a mainstream primary school
2. A special class in a mainstream primary school
3. A special primary school
4. Don't know or haven't decided yet

31. Have you engaged with a relevant professional in relation to planning your child's transition to primary school?

1. Early Years Specialist (a **Better Start/ AIM** Early Year Specialists)
2. Special Education Needs Organisers (who work for the National Council for Special Education)
3. Other (please specify)

Thank you for completing the survey.

**Consent to be contacted to discuss your child's experiences of the exemption to the upper age limit to the Early Childhood Care and Education pre-school programme.**

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills have asked the National Disability Authority to assist them with the review of the exemption to the upper age limit for the **ECCE** pre-school programme by independently reviewing relevant evidence and engaging with key stakeholders.

In addition to gathering information from parents through this survey, the National Disability Authority would like to interview some parents about their child's experience of their exemption to the upper age limit for the **ECCE** pre-school programme.

The interviews will be phone interviews and will be arranged at a time of the day that suits you. They will take no longer than 20 minutes to complete.

32. Please indicate whether or not you wish to be interviewed

1. Yes, I agree to being contacted by the National Disability Authority about participating in a short phone interview
2. No, I don't want to be contacted by the National Disability Authority about participating in a short phone interview

33. If you answered "Yes" to question 32 above please state your first name and provide a phone number on which the National Disability Authority can contact you about setting up a phone interview.

Name

Number

Please note that it may not be possible for the National Disability Authority to interview all those who have expressed a willingness to be interviewed