

### 3.7 Education and Education Disadvantage

**CORE POLICY OBJECTIVE:  
EDUCATION & EDUCATION DISADVANTAGE**

**To provide relevant education for all people throughout their lives, so that they can participate fully and meaningfully in developing themselves, their community and the wider society**

Education can be an agent for social transformation. *Social Justice Ireland* believes that education can be a powerful force in counteracting inequality and poverty while recognising that, in many ways, the present education system has quite the opposite effect. Recent studies confirm the persistence of social class inequalities which are seemingly ingrained in the system. Even in the context of the increased participation and economic expansion of much of the last decade, the education system continues to mediate the vicious cycle of disadvantage and social exclusion between generations. While there are a number of programmes and initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage, many of these initiatives simply involve providing additional resources for disadvantaged schools. Our policy approach in this area is based on a belief that early school leaving is a particularly serious manifestation of wider inequality in education, which is embedded in and caused by structures in the system itself.

#### **Expenditure on Education**

Ireland's expenditure on education equalled 4.9 per cent of GDP (5.6 per cent of GNI) in 2006, the latest year for which comparable EU-wide data is available (see table 3.7.1). This compares to an EU-25 average of 5.1 per cent of GDP in that year. Over time, as national income has increased the share allocated to education has slowly increased; a fact which we strongly welcome. In 1995 expenditure on education equalled 4.4 per cent of GDP and 5.4 per cent of GNP (OECD, 2005:30).

**Table 3.7.1: EU-27 expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 2006**

<b>Country</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>%</b>
Denmark	8.0	<b>IRELAND (GDP)</b>	<b>4.9</b>
Cyprus	7.0	Lithuania	4.8
Sweden	6.9	Estonia	4.8
Finland	6.1	Italy	4.7
Belgium	6.0	Czech Republic	4.6
Slovenia	5.7	Germany	4.4
<b>IRELAND (GNI)</b>	<b>5.6</b>	Spain	4.3
France	5.6	Bulgaria	4.2
United Kingdom	5.5	Slovakia	3.8
Netherlands	5.5	Luxembourg	3.4
Austria	5.4	Greece*	4.0
Hungary	5.4	Malta*	6.8
Poland	5.3	Romania*	3.5
Portugal	5.3		
Latvia	5.1	<b>EU 27</b>	<b>5.1</b>

**Source:** CSO (2009:48)

**Notes:** \* Data for 2005

Using Irish data we can analyse public non-capital education expenditure per student in Ireland over the 1998–2007 period. It shows that there have been real increases at all three education levels. Table 3.7.2 shows that these changes have been 61 per cent in first level, 55 per cent for second level students and 6 per cent at third level. While a substantial proportion of these increases can be allocated to increased pay for teachers, the increase is nevertheless noticeable. The trend is also partly explained by the trend in student numbers. Between 1998/99 and 2007/08 the numbers of students in Ireland grew by 7.5 per cent at first level and declined by 7.4 per cent at second level. However, over the same period, the number of third level students increased by around 29 per cent (CSO: 2009:47). It should also be noted, however, that Ireland's young population as a proportion of total population is large by EU standards and, consequently, a higher than average spend on education might be expected.

**Table 3.7.2: Ireland's non-capital public expenditure on education 1998-2007, expressed at 2006 prices**

€ per pupil				Total expenditure €m
Year	First level	Second level	Third level	
1998	3,684	5,505	10,162	4,934
1999	3,820	5,605	10,425	5,055
2000	4,104	5,878	10,115	5,256
2001	4,253	6,440	10,522	5,551
2002	4,677	6,882	10,579	5,933
2003	5,108	7,387	10,394	6,323
2004	5,488	7,450	10,071	6,509
2005	5,519	7,647	10,305	6,624
2006	5,780	8,085	10,883	7,018
2007	5,930	8,531	10,745	7,333

**Source:** CSO, 2009:47

When viewed in an international context, the most striking feature of investment in education in Ireland, relative to other OECD and EU countries, is our comparative under-investment in primary education relative to international norms (not to mention our very limited public funding for early childhood education)<sup>66</sup>. Irish investment in third-level education, which is widely regarded as inadequate, is approximately at the OECD average. However, our public investment at second level and, in particular, at primary level is substantially below the OECD average and is among the lowest of all OECD countries when the expenditure is standardised as a percentage of GDP.<sup>67</sup>

The importance of investment in education is widely acknowledged. For individuals, the rewards from education are clear. Those with higher qualifications earn, on average, far more over their lifetime than those with lower qualifications. However, for those who do not assign great value to improving education levels in themselves, a study published by Statistics Canada shows a clear and significant association between pro-active investment in education in any period and a country's subsequent growth and labour productivity (Coulombe et al, 2004). This study, which looked at adult literacy skills of people in 14 countries who entered

<sup>66</sup> Budget 2009#2 proposed some reforms in the area of early childhood education and we look forward to reviewing its progress as the new scheme becomes established.

<sup>67</sup> See OECD (2004: 216; 2009:69-70).

the labour force in the period 1960 to 1995, identified a clear and significant association between investments in human capital in each period and a country's subsequent growth and labour productivity. Specifically, a rise of 1 per cent in literacy scores relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5 per cent relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5 per cent rise in GDP per head.

### **Planning for future education needs**

Over the past number of years there has been minimal long-term strategic planning by the Department of Education as regards investment in education facilities at primary and secondary level. This factor was most strongly highlighted in Budget 2008 when the Government announced 'an immediate increase of €95m in funding for the Primary School Building programme'. However, it remains a worry that it is only at the end of 2007 that we began to plan for increases in child number at primary schools, starting September 2008. This is particularly the case given detailed data available from Census 2001 and 2006 which signalled these impending increases and their timing and spatial distribution.

In that context *Social Justice Ireland* believes it is important that Government, and in particular the Department of Education, pay attention to the population projections calculated by the CSO for the years to come. In its 2008 publication *Population and Labour Force Projections 2011-2041* the CSO signalled that the number of primary school children will increase from 433,900 in 2001 to almost 500,000 by 2011 and will climb further to almost 550,000 by 2016 (CSO, 2008:27, 33). In its 2008 report the CSO specifically addressed the school population issue and stated that:

“The projected changes will directly impact on the population of school-going age. Taking the “primary” school population as being broadly represented by those aged 5-12 years, the numbers in this category are projected to increase progressively under all combinations of assumptions in the period 2006-2021...Even in the absence of migration (M0) the “primary” school going population is projected to increase by between 30,000 and 68,000 over the period 2006-2021, depending on the fertility assumption chosen” (CSO, 2008: 28).

Addressing future needs at secondary school the CSO stated:

“The numbers of children of “secondary” school age (i.e. persons aged 13-18 years5 ) under all combinations of assumptions are projected to continue

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to decline until 2011 and to then experience a recovery by 2016 due to the higher number of births from 2003 onwards” (CSO, 2008: 28).

Table 3.7.3 summarises the CSO’s projections.<sup>68</sup>

<b>Year</b>	<b>Primary (ages 5-12)</b>	<b>Secondary (ages 13-18)</b>
2001 (actual)	433,900	375,300
2006 (actual)	450,500	342,300
2011	497,200	337,900
2016	548,700	370,100
2021	599,500	401,500
2026	611,200	441,900
2031	583,000	463,500
2036	543,500	452,500
2041	528,500	420,500

**Source:** CSO (2004; 2008:27, 33) using M2F1 population projection assumption.

While it is likely that some of these projections will be reduced given the current recession, *Social Justice Ireland* believes that these increases require long-term planning and more comprehensive programmes of school expansion; rapid reactions are neither prudent nor appropriate public policy.

### **Literacy problems**

The issue of literacy has been contentious in recent times. Some years ago an OECD survey found that a quarter of the Ireland’s adult population performed at the very lowest level of literacy. More recently, the OECD found that Ireland’s fifteen-year olds have the fifth best literacy rates out of 27 OECD countries. The reality appears to be that the literacy levels among Ireland’s school-going population is much higher than among the population generally. But this hides a more telling fact.

A 2004 report prepared for the Department of Education examined literacy standards in disadvantaged primary schools. This report by the Education Research Centre at St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra found that more than 30 per cent of

<sup>68</sup> Recent economic events, including the return of emigration, are likely to have some impact on these figures, in particular those for primary school numbers. However, the scale of this impact is likely to be small.

children in those schools suffer from severe literacy problems. Furthermore, it concluded that only a small minority of 12-year olds from these areas take a positive view of their own reading achievement (Eivers et al, 2004). A similar report by the same authors published in late 2005 reaffirmed these findings and also noted that in some poorer areas up to 50 per cent of pupils have literacy difficulties (Eivers et al, 2005)

Both reports highlight the two-tier pattern of Ireland's educational outcomes. Many do very well. But it is also clear that a great many are being left behind. As identified in a 2003 report by the Department of Education and Science, "the worrying tendency for educational disadvantage to cluster in specific schools/areas and to be reproduced across generations raises serious equity issues and highlights the need for effective educational interventions"(2003:7).

The Department of Education's policy for tackling literacy problems among adults is in the opinion of *Social Justice Ireland* simply unacceptable. As part of the 2007 Government *NAPinclusion* document a target for adult literacy policy was set stating that "the proportion of the population aged 16–64 with restricted literacy will be reduced to between 10%–15% by 2016, from the level of 25% found in 1997" where "restricted literacy" is defined as level 1 on the International Adult Literacy Scale. People at this level of literacy are considered to possess "very poor skills, where the individual may, for example, be unable to determine the correct amount of medicine to give a child from information printed on the package" (OECD).

As table 3.7.4 shows, in numerical terms this implies that the aim of government policy is to have "only" 301,960 adults with serious literacy difficulties in Ireland by 2016.<sup>69</sup>

Adult population (under 65 yrs) in 2016	3,019,600
10% "restricted literacy" target	301,960
15% "restricted literacy" target	452,940

**Source:** Calculated from CSO (2008:27) using the lowest CSO population projection for 2106 – the M0F2 population projection assumption.

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<sup>68</sup> Recent economic events, including the return of emigration, are likely to have some impact on these figures, in particular those for primary school numbers. However, the scale of this impact is likely to be small.

The question needs to be asked, how can policy aim to be so unambitious? How will these people with serious literacy problems function effectively in the economy and society that is emerging in Ireland? How can they get meaningful jobs? In reality achieving this target could only be interpreted as representing substantial and sustained failure.

Overall, *Social Justice Ireland* believes that the government's literacy target is illogical, un-ambitious and suggests a complete lack of interest in seriously addressing this problem. This is totally unacceptable in a society which, for the first time in its history, has the resources to tackle these problems effectively and comprehensively. This target on literacy should be revised downwards dramatically and the necessary resources committed to ensuring that the revised target is met. *Social Justice Ireland* believes that the government should adopt a new and more ambitious target of:

reducing the proportion of the population aged 16–64 with restricted literacy to 5 per cent by 2016; and to 3 per cent by 2020.

This will still leave approximately 150,000 adults without basic literacy levels in 2016. However, this target is a more ambitious and realistic in the context of the future social and economic development of Ireland.

### **Early school leaving and unemployment**

Socio-economic background is closely linked to early school leaving as a high proportion of early school leavers come from semi-skilled and unskilled manual backgrounds. Employment opportunities and earning power are linked generally to level of education attained. People with no qualifications are more likely to be unemployed and if employed are less likely to gain promotion in their careers. As the analysis in section 3.1 of the review has show, they are also more likely to be experiencing poverty. Even in the context of increased participation, the education system continues to mediate the transmission of disadvantage and social exclusion between generations.

<b>Labour force status</b>	<b>Persons</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
In employment	27,200	19,800	7,400
Unemployed	8,300	6,300	2,000
Unemployment rate of early school leavers (%)	23.4	24.1	21.3

**Source:** CSO, 2008:52

The unemployment rate for persons in Ireland aged 18-24 with, at most, lower second level education (and not in further education or training) was 8.4 per cent in 2007. Since then it is likely to have increased further. The significantly higher risk of unemployment attached to early school leaving underscores the need to give greater focus to this issue. Continued high rates of early school leaving will lead to the growth of a substantial group of people permanently excluded from the benefits of Irish society in the decades ahead. According to the CSO the proportion of persons aged 18-24 who left school with, at most, lower second level education in Ireland, was 12.3 per cent in 2006 (CSO 2008:52).

In recent studies both the ESRI and the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) has indicated that 800-1,000 children each year fail to make the transition from primary to secondary school. Retention from lower to upper second level is currently roughly 83 per cent through schooling (therefore 17 per cent are early school leavers). The CSO figures quoted above suggest that further education and training opportunities are bringing a further 4-5 per cent of the cohort up to a level of or equivalent to 'at least upper second level' by the time they reach 20 to 24 years old, which is encouraging but serves to illustrate the scale of the problem that remains.

Government has invested heavily in trying to secure a school-based solution to this problem such as the NEWB. It may well be time to try alternative approaches aimed at ensuring that people in this cohort attain the skills required to progress in the future.

### **Key issues: Early childhood education**

Budget 2009 #2 made a commitment that Government will introduce an early childhood education scheme. In the past the issue of early childhood education has not had a high profile within Ireland's policy development processes. However, this situation has changed in recent years with the growing realisation of the importance of early education for children. Nowadays the benefits of early education are acknowledged as studies show that it helps to determine how long children stay in school and how quickly they will find employment after leaving school. This requires a greater emphasis and additional resources within the Irish education system if the high non-completion rates outlined above are to be addressed successfully. We welcome the recent moves in this direction and encourage Government to promote this scheme in a way which ensures it is accessible, appropriately resourced and monitored.

**Key issues: Lifelong learning**

One of the basic principles that should underpin lifelong learning is the democratic one of equality of status as people. Access in adult life to desirable employment and choices is closely linked to level of educational attainment. Equal political rights cannot exist where some are socially excluded and educationally disadvantaged. The lifelong opportunities of those who are educationally disadvantaged are in sharp contrast to the opportunities for meaningful participation of those who have completed a second or third level education. Therefore, lifelong education should be seen as a basic need. In this context, second chance education and continuing education are vitally important and require ongoing support.

Access to educational opportunity and meaningful participation in the system together with access to successful outcomes is central to the democratic delivery of education. This is not to suggest a one-menu approach for everyone; rather it posits a variety of channels leading to parity of esteem. Equally it does not suppose a similar timeframe for the completion of a particular phase of education for everyone. Such a vision mirrors the stated policy of the White Paper on Adult Education and Lifelong Learning (2000), which sought to develop a strategic and targeted response which is co-ordinated within itself and with other sectors. This strategy would also enable progressive movement between education/home/work as a prelude to the development of mass provision. However, certain priority groups would be targeted initially and in the future in the interests of social inclusion and economic efficiency.

Within this context it is important to emphasise that people should not be seen as failures if they choose not to progress to third level on successful completion of second level education. This is a fundamentally different issue to the failure to complete second level education. It should be acknowledged that it is perfectly acceptable for young people to take alternative pathways to adult self-reliance and participation in the labour market. However, this suggests that people who take this approach should have access (for education and training purposes) to the resources that would otherwise have been spent on them by the state if they had gone into full-time third level education directly from school. An initiative along these lines is required. The exchequer invests 2.5 times more money per capita in the education of those who complete three years of third-level education than it does for those who leave school before the completion of post-primary education. In the light of the barriers to educational participation of the more disadvantaged people, especially at post-school level, a basic educational allowance for full-time and part-time education should be available to each person between the ages of

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eighteen and forty who does not proceed to third level from school. Eligible parties seeking re-entry to second chance education at all levels could draw upon such monies on demand for educational courses. Such an initiative could serve to increase access over an extended period for people currently disadvantaged by financial constraints and third-level structures. In this way, a culture of access to continuing lifelong educational opportunity might become the norm. The right to equality of educational opportunity has long been accepted both by individuals and by the state. This concept of equality of educational opportunity implies equality of educational funding by the state for its citizens. Such funding is, in fact, an issue of rights, of equality, of social inclusion and of citizenship. It should be additional to funding for educationally disadvantaged, socially excluded and marginalised people. Also, it should be additional to funding provided to respond to educational disadvantage through the home and the community.

### **Additional resources required**

The Irish public has consistently favoured a situation where government meets all the costs of first and second level education. There is also strong support for government supporting additional educational spending on children with learning difficulties. Likewise there is strong support for government providing the necessary support to ensure there are alternative pathways for those who fail to complete second level education. Government should act on this support and provide the required financing on condition that it can be shown that value is being got for the money invested.

There is also a need that funding should be secured for early childhood education and for lifelong education. It is clear that substantial additional funding will be required to support these areas in the years ahead.

Education is widely recognised as crucial to the achievement of our national objectives of economic competitiveness, social inclusion and active citizenship. However, the overall levels of public funding for education in Ireland are out-of-step with our social and economic aspirations. This under-funding is most severe in the early years of education and in the area of second-chance education – the very areas that are most vital in terms of the promotion of greater equity and fairness.

### **Policy Proposals on Education and Education Disadvantage**

- **Make access to ongoing educational opportunity the norm. To this end:**
  - **Ensure quality childcare and pre-school education, preferably in a community setting.**
  - **Ensure meaningful participation in education up to the end of second level.**
  - **Prioritise access to education for those outside the formal school system by the provision of user friendly structures and systems which enable success.**
  - **Increase the resources available for adult education.**
- **Adopt a new and more ambitious adult literacy target.**
- **Significantly increase the funding provided to address literacy problems including the funding provided to the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA).**
- **Introduce a Basic Educational Allowance for full-time and part-time education for each person between ages 18 and 40 who does not proceed to third level from school.**
- **Target resources to address the problem of early school leaving and thereby minimise the future costs (for the individual and society) of this problem.**
- **Provide the necessary resources to ensure relevant education is available to migrants, Travellers, people with a disability and other vulnerable groups.**
- **Ensure the right to self-realisation and equal participation in society by**
  - **widening access to back-to-education initiatives**
  - **improved student support for the educationally disadvantaged**
  - **the provision of a basic educational investment allowance**
  - **work-linked and full-time literacy initiatives.**