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*Social Justice Matters Policy Brief*

## Education and Covid-19

June 2021



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## Social Justice Matters Policy Brief

‘Social Justice Matters Policy Brief’ is a series designed to provide independent and in-depth analysis on important social policy issues and to present policy options that should be prioritised in the coming years. This series is part of *Social Justice Ireland’s* ongoing contribution to the public policy debate to ensure it focuses on what matters most to people who are poor or vulnerable or in need. Our aim is to improve public policy in order to improve society and the lives of people.

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## Executive Summary

The impact of Covid-19 induced school closures and resultant learning losses will follow students into the labour market. These students face long-term losses in income and an average student can expect around 3 per cent lower earnings throughout their lifetime as a result of the interruption to their education

Disadvantaged students will suffer greater learning losses and greater impacts on their lifetime earnings. Much of the progress made addressing educational disadvantage to date will be reversed unless the appropriate policies and investment are put in place.

The optimistic scenario for the educational impact of Covid-19 on national economies is a loss of 1.5 per cent GDP throughout the remainder of the century, with this loss expected to be even greater if education systems are slow to return to prior levels of performance.

In Ireland more than four in ten students reported a major or moderate negative impact on their learning as a result of Covid-19 induced school closures and over fifty per cent of students reported that they did not learn enough during school closures.

Covid-19 and extended school closures has had a devastating, and likely lasting, impact on children with special educational needs and their families. Notwithstanding the increases in investment in Special Needs Education in recent Budgets, much more remains to be done in order to support these children and their families in the education system.

Educational level attained is one of the most important individual factors in reducing the risk of poverty for adults and, as this educational level seems to be linked across generations, it is important for reducing child and household poverty. Addressing educational disadvantage and investing sufficient resources into policies that work must be a Government priority

## **Introduction**

This policy brief addresses the impact of COVID-19 on education at primary level and second level and considers some key policy priorities that should be implemented by Government as part of the response.

The focus of our education system must be to ensure people are engaged and active citizens and have the necessary critical and creative skills to navigate an ever-changing employment environment, can adapt to transitions as they occur and participate fully in society. This is especially important for children and young people today who have had their education disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and who, upon leaving formal education, will be entering a very different employment landscape to their parents.

One of the findings of the initial research on the impact of Covid-19 on education is that the learning gap between rich and poor will grow and that disadvantaged students will suffer greater learning losses and greater impacts on their lifetime earnings (OECD, 2020). Much of the progress made addressing educational disadvantage to date will be reversed unless the appropriate policies and investment are put in place. Policy makers must give serious consideration as to how the lost learning of students at all levels of education will be made up in the coming months and years.

This briefing will examine international and national evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people in the education system and outline some policies and reforms, which if implemented, could mitigate for some of the worst impacts of lost learning and disrupted education since March 2020.

## 1.1 Impact of Covid-19 on Education

### International trends

A study examining the long-term impacts of Covid-19 induced learning disruption on the outcomes for students from the equivalent of first class at primary level to the Leaving Certificate found that learning opportunities were significantly reduced during school closures and the reductions were greatest for disadvantaged children (OECD, 2020). This is not just an issue of a ‘digital divide’ (although this is a contributing factor). Learning is a dynamic process that builds on prior learning and students require explanations and support from trained teachers to acquire new skills, learning and information. Extended school closures will lead to growing deficits in learning and may reverse many of the gains made in recent years in terms of reducing educational disadvantage.

The findings regarding the economic impact of interrupted learning and education on the individual student’s earnings throughout their lifetime are very concerning. The impact of Covid-19 induced school closures and resultant learning losses will follow students into the labour market. These students face long-term losses in income and an average student can expect around 3 per cent lower earnings throughout their lifetime as a result of the interruption to their education. This estimate should be considered the lower end of potential losses as higher skill levels are significantly linked to employment and higher earnings. Disadvantaged students will almost certainly see larger impacts on their lifetime earnings.

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The impact on national GDP is equally concerning. The optimistic scenario for the educational impact of Covid-19 on national economies is a loss of 1.5 per cent GDP throughout the remainder of the century, with this loss expected to be even greater if education systems are slow to return to prior levels of performance. This annual loss of GDP is as a result of lower incomes, lower tax revenues, lower skill levels and productivity and a higher reliance on social protection systems as a result of the impact of Covid-19 on education systems. This estimate was produced in 2020 so does not include the learning losses and school closures so far in 2021, therefore the long-term impact on students and economies is likely to be more damaging.

## National trends

The impact of school closures in Ireland have been analysed by the CSO (2020). The main findings echo those of international studies. In Ireland more than four in ten students reported a major or moderate negative impact on their learning as a result of Covid-19 induced school closures. The same number reported similar impacts in terms of negative effects on social development and over fifty per cent of students reported that they did not learn enough during school closures. As with international evidence, the digital divide has an impact, but ultimately the lack of instruction and explanation from teachers, and being absent from a school and the learning environment, had a negative impact on students at primary and second level. One of the policies that can begin to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on children is that sufficient resources are in place to support all families, particularly children in DEIS schools.

## 1.2 Policies and Reforms

### Reduce class sizes and pupil teacher ratios

Ireland has a pupil teacher ratio (PTR) at primary level of 15.3 (the EU average is 14.7) and an average class size of 25 (the EU average is 20). Clearly there is progress to be made in terms of reducing our PTR and class sizes at primary level. The publication of a technical paper on developing a teacher demand and supply model is a useful first step in planning to meet current and future demands (DES, 2019). A surplus of teachers at primary and post primary level is projected in 2036 if no actions are taken now. This presents Government with an unprecedented opportunity to address our challenges regarding class sizes and pupil teacher ratios.

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It is important that as student intake changes, existing resources are used to address persistent challenges within the education system such as pupil teacher ratios and addressing educational disadvantage which persists in our education systems.

A reduction in student numbers does not necessarily mean a knock-on reduction in expenditure. We can implement policy instruments now to reduce our class sizes (particularly at primary level), reduce pupil teacher ratios, and ensure that demand and supply are managed appropriately. Issues such as how to best utilise existing resources (personnel or financial) to reduce pupil teacher ratio and to reduce class sizes, whilst ensuring our system adapts to meet changing needs, are just some of the areas that require in-depth discussion and analysis.

As smaller class sizes make the biggest difference to the youngest classes, Government policy must ensure that the PTR in the youngest classes in primary school is at a level which allows teachers to provide early interventions without

disruption. This is vital to ensure the best educational outcomes for all children and a smooth transition from early years settings to the formal education system.

### **Children with additional needs**

The number of children with special needs at primary level in Ireland increased by 63 per cent between 2014 and 2018 (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). These children require particular supports and the announcement of the School Inclusion Model pilot by the Department of Education in 2019, and its continuation into 2020/21, was welcome. Of particular concern, however, in light of the increased intake of children with special needs, is research that found one in four children with an intellectual disability or developmental disability has been put on a short school day (Brennan & Browne, 2019). The report outlined the detrimental impact that this is having on children with additional needs, their education and on their families.

Covid-19 and extended school closures has had a devastating, and likely lasting, impact on these children and their families. Notwithstanding the increases in investment in Special Needs Education in recent Budgets, clearly much more remains to be done in order to meet demand, mitigate the impact of extended school closures, and to support schools to ensure that they have the required number of staff with appropriate qualifications, and the necessary programmes, supports and resources to meet the needs of this cohort of pupils. In terms of planning and resourcing, it is vital that all departmental projections take into account the needs of this cohort as they move from primary level to post primary and beyond.

### **Educational disadvantage at primary level and second level**

Despite positive improvements and progress since 2002, gaps in terms of attainment and achievement remain between students attending DEIS (Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools) schools and their peers from more affluent backgrounds. Although some modest improvements have been observed in trends in literacy and numeracy at primary level, much more needs to be done. A policy intervention that has been effective is reducing class sizes to below 20 pupils in disadvantaged areas, and ensuring that this strategy is adequately resourced and supported.

As outlined earlier smaller class sizes make the biggest difference to the youngest classes. Reducing class sizes in DEIS primary schools must be a policy priority as Government begins to formulate plans to mitigate the learning losses and impact of school closures on disadvantaged students.

Looking at second level trends, despite steady progress, significant variations in proficiency remain in Ireland between students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools. An analysis of trends in PISA<sup>1</sup> achievement indicates that in reading, mathematics and science, students in DEIS schools have consistently achieved significantly lower average achievement than students in non-DEIS schools across all PISA cycles examined (Gilleece, 2020). While the size of the gap has narrowed significantly in reading, it has not changed significantly in

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<sup>1</sup> Programmes for International Student Assessment (PISA) assesses the preparedness of 15-year-olds to meet the challenges they may encounter in their future lives, including education.

mathematics or science. Students attending DEIS schools continue to score much lower on all three domains, pointing to the need to continue to focus resources on addressing educational disadvantage.

The impact of education, across all age groups cannot be underestimated and particularly for those in disadvantaged groups. The longer a person remains in the educational system the more likely they are to be in employment. Educational level attained is one of the most important individual factors in reducing the risk of poverty for adults and, as this educational level seems to be linked across generations, it is important for reducing child and household poverty. Addressing educational disadvantage and investing sufficient resources into policies that work must be a Government priority.

### 1.3 Policy Priorities for Education

The benefits of investing in education, both to the individual, to the economy and to society, far outweigh any initial outlay of resources. This is something that should be at the forefront of decisions regarding the investment and resourcing of our education system as a whole. *Social Justice Ireland* believes that if the challenges we have highlighted throughout this paper are to be effectively addressed, Government's key policy priorities should be to:

Use the Department of Education projections in terms of enrolment and staff numbers to inform investment, plan for reducing class sizes, reducing pupil teacher ratios (a persistent problem which Covid-19 has highlighted), and ensuring that our education system has all of the resources that it requires to meet our national ambitions.

Address educational disadvantage by keeping average class sizes below 20, reducing the pupil teacher ratio further and ensuring all DEIS Band 1 and 2 schools have sufficient resources to implement strategies to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for pupils.

Make the improvement of educational outcomes for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and disadvantaged communities a policy priority, with additional resources focused on addressing the persistence of educational disadvantage.

Invest in reducing class sizes and pupil teacher ratios at primary and post primary level.

Support schools to ensure that they have the required number of staff with appropriate qualifications, and the necessary programmes, supports and resources to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs.



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**Social Justice Ireland** is an independent think-tank and justice advocacy organisation of that advances the lives of people and communities through providing independent social analysis and effective policy development to create a sustainable future for every member of society and for societies as a whole.



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