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Schools ‘must play bigger role in tackling hunger, inadequate sleep’

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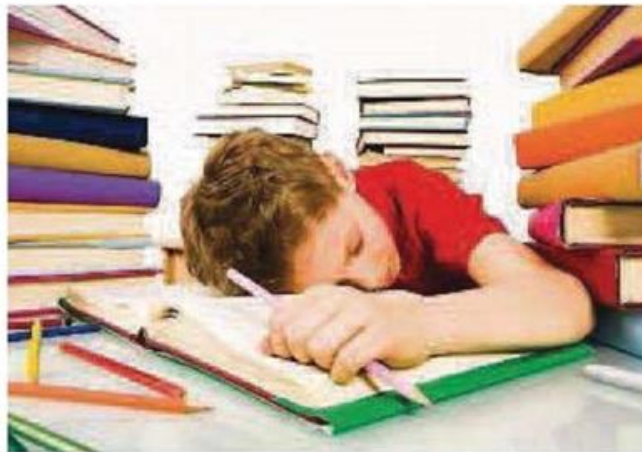
Issues such as tackling inadequate sleep and hunger need to play a bigger role in how Irish schools combat disadvantage, according to the author of a European Commission report.

Paul Downes, director of the Educational Disadvantage Centre at Dublin City University (DCU), has also called for teams to provide community-based services in and around schools tailored to young people and their parents.

He is author of a commission report proposing a multidisciplinary focus on health and welfare as one of the approaches to widening educational inclusivity.

Mr Downes said it is evident from key issues arising in the EU report that adequate sleep for students needs to be promoted, but that it is missing from the 2014-20 national policy document about children and young people.

Previous research in Eu-



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rope links longer computer use by teenagers to reduced sleep and more frequent psychological issues like feeling low, irritable, or bad-tempered, as well as headaches and dizziness.

Research in 2014, based on a scheme piloted in a Dublin primary school with high poverty levels, showed the amount of sleep pupils get on

weekdays could be increased through intervention in the curriculum if it also involved parents.

Mr Downes was involved in a 2007 study that found some students in Dublin schools associated with high levels of poverty and social exclusion reported being unable to sleep due to hunger and stress.

The indicators against which the EU report recommends national governments and individual schools should assess themselves include child hunger.

“Our approach to child hunger as a poverty-related barrier to education needs to be addressed to prevent fragmentation at local and national levels,” said Mr Downes.

As well as providing free meals for pupils affected by poverty, the report highlights the importance of free transport for those travelling longer distances, and support with book costs.

Mr Downes said multidisciplinary supports could help development of better alternatives to suspending or expelling students. He said more intensive emotional support services in school is also required.

“Emotional counselling services, as distinct from career guidance, are almost non-existent in both primary and post-primary. This is in stark contrast to other European countries,” he said.