



New government must urgently face up to the crisis of pupils' needs in Deis schools

Dr Paul Downes



OVER the past decade Ireland is one of the countries in the EU with the sharpest decrease in early school leaving. The impact of the Covid-19 lockdown threatens to dismantle this progress.

The response from the outgoing government and Department of Education and Skills to the educational crisis affecting our most socio-economically marginalised children and young people has been tepid thus far, perhaps owing to the scale of the pandemic. However, a much more considered policy response is now required from the incoming government.

The damaging impact of at least six months out of school for children in Deis schools in communities experiencing high levels of poverty and socio-economic marginalisation is clear. Major concerns are lowered capacity for concentration and engagement in structured tasks; strain upon mental health and behaviour; and a reading loss far greater than the well-known phenomenon of summer reading loss. This loss brings arguably an even greater impact on maths performance, according to a recent report by Professor Stephen Lamb, for the Australian federal government.

The recent Department of Education and Skills announcement that classes in wellbeing, literacy and numeracy will take place for Deis students in August to act as a bridge to the start of the new school year is to be welcomed but does not go far enough in terms of scope, funding and

numbers to participate. It needs to be a substantial expansion of the pre-existing Deis summer camps programme

In Dublin's north-east inner city, 25pc of children in primary schools are not

engaged in distance learning. This is replicated across Deis schools and is even higher in certain areas. There is a myriad of reasons for non-engagement, including parents not coping with a child's behaviour or poor parental mental health. There are children whose parents have addiction issues and are in the care of grandparents who may not be tech savvy.

A delicate balance needs to be struck between children's health, educational, social and emotional needs as the lockdown is eased in a phased manner.

The Literacy Through the Arts summer programme needs to be rolled out to all Deis students who need it over the summer. The envisaged Deis summer camps programme takes only a small proportion of pupils from a school. It is imperative that a strategy is not taken of simply focusing on those pupils of highest need

in Deis schools for such summer camp supports. The Mate-Tricks Evaluation of CDI Tallaght in the related area of after-school supports found that this concentration of pupils of highest need together can do more harm than good.

A national fund for summer projects targeting areas of high poverty needs to be urgently established so children and young people can receive at least two weeks of summer involvement in structured and semi-structured meaningful activities, integrating maths and literacy into areas such as arts, sport and outdoor activities in nature. This needs to be implemented at community level.

Such funding streams must not be mired in bureaucracy. They are also needed across communities and not simply for Deis school pupils. The community sector can also play a key role in the year to come in providing out-of-school projects, if students have restricted access to school some days due to social distancing protocols. From the autumn, there needs to be emotional counselling and therapeutic

supports such as play and art therapy available in all Deis schools and arguably beyond to provide at least one key limb of support for the mental health strain and trauma experienced by so many children.

Schools serve as a protective factor for children's emotional wellbeing, and the long closure will have a detrimental impact on vulnerable children. Many Deis schools provide play therapy but this is ad hoc in nature, funded by a mixture of corporate funding, some limited School Completion funding or voluntary therapeutic placements. This autumn, post the Covid closures, is the optimum time for the department to fund a much-needed service for children. These play and art therapy and emotional counselling supports can build on the draft programme for government's commitment to 'improve access to supports for positive mental health in schools' and would be a fitting post-pandemic legacy for children.

Questions of responsibility and accountability for disengaged pupils immediately spring to mind. In its Guidance on the Continuity of Schooling, Supporting Students at Risk of Educational Disadvantage, by suggesting schools make 'daily contact' with pupils they are concerned about, the Department of Education and Skills puts the onus on individual schools. Schools can only do so much. This crisis also needs a consistent, concerted statutory, as well as community, response.

The limited statutory involvement or supports are simply compounding the damage the closure is doing.

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