**PRESCHOOLS IN POORER AREAS TO BENEFIT FROM EXTRA STAFF AND FREE MEALS FOR CHILDREN**

Deis-style support model to be extended to early years care and education

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Research shows that children from middle-class families outperform those from less well-off homes even before they begin primary school, writes Carl O’Brien. Preschools in poorer areas will receive higher staff to child ratios and free meals for children under a new strategy to boost outcomes from disadvantaged backgrounds. The plans are based on the Deis (Delivering Equality of Opportunity) model which provides extra resources for primary and secondary schools. The plans will be outlined in the Government’s early years strategy which is due to be published next week, according to informed sources. READ MORE

The 10-year blueprint has been developed by Minister for Children Katherine Zappone and officials across a number of Government departments. Research shows that children from middle-class families outperform those from less well-off homes even before they begin primary school. A recent Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) study, for example, found evidence of a significant gap in children’s language development as early as three years of age depending on their socio-economic background.

The Deis scheme has been shown to have a positive impact in improving educational outcomes for children in disadvantaged areas. However, high-quality early years care and education has been shown to have a dramatic effect in boosting children’s learning, as well as supporting well-being, mental health and positive socio-emotional outcomes.

**Narrow the gap**

In some research, it has been found to equalise children’s early childhood experiences and narrow the gap between more and less advantaged groups. The strategy is understood to prioritise investment in high-quality early years care and education for all children, with additional supports in areas where there are high proportions of children at risk of poverty. ‘I know so many talented, hard working, smart women for whom high mortgages and long commutes have meant that childcare costs were the straw that broke the camel’s back, and they have decided to stay at home.’

High-quality early years care and education has been shown to have a dramatic effect in boosting children’s learning, as well as supporting well-being, mental health and positive socio-emotional outcomes. It also sets out a Deis-style model for these preschools which would include additional funding for smaller staff:child ratios, family liaison staff, parent supports and funding for provision of meals to address food poverty.

The strategy says it will be based on further research into the profile of need of children and evidence about the types of support that are most likely to impact on their experiences and outcomes. It is anticipated that scoping for this programme will develop a resource allocation model to ensure additional funding is available where it is most needed. Sources say research to identify demand and needs is set to get under way next year, which will form part of the annual budget negotiations.

**Key focus**

It has also been found to narrow the development gap between middle-class and less well-off children. However, Government officials acknowledge that a stubborn gap remains between Deis and non-Deis schools. A key focus under the Deis scheme has been the improvement of literacy and numeracy levels among those most at risk of not reaching their full potential. These schools also have access to literacy and numeracy support measures including programmes such as “reading recovery”. They also have access to a home school community liaison co-ordinator who play a vital role in establishing links between the parent and the school to encourage improved attendance, participation, retention and progression.