

## Submission to the NESF Child Literacy and Social Inclusion Project Team

Submitted by:

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### Introduction

The focus of the School Completion Programme (SCP) centres on young people who are at risk of leaving school early as early school leavers are more likely to experience social exclusion, poor patterns of employment and marginalisation. The programme incorporates the elements of best practice established by the 8-15 Year Old Early School Leaver Initiative and the Stay in School Retention Initiative at second level. Both of these initiatives had pilot phases that ended in 2002.

The SCP is based on an integrated approach involving all the key stakeholders, and aims to have 'a significant positive impact on levels of pupil retention in primary and second level schools and on number of pupils who successfully complete the Senior Cycle, or equivalent' (SCP Specification Booklet). There are currently 124 SCP projects in existence, which includes 42 new projects that were established under the Department's strategy DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: An Action Plan on Educational Inclusion. A total of 691 schools (227 post primary and 464 primary) currently has the services of the School Completion Programme under DEIS.

Before the DEIS expansion, eligible post-primary schools were selected for the programme on the basis of their low pupil retention rates. These schools were grouped into 82 clusters of one or more second level schools and their main feeder primary schools. Under DEIS, primary and post-primary schools were selected using a set of criteria developed by the Department of Education and Science and the Education Research Centre (ERC). The existing clusters have established Local Management Committees comprised of school principals, various voluntary and statutory agencies, SCP local coordinator, parents and community interests. These Local Management Committees are responsible for developing and managing a costed and integrated plan for addressing early school leaving in the area (the Retention Plan).

### Project Aims

The main aims of the programme are:

To retain young people in the formal education system to completion of the Senior Cycle, or equivalent.

To improve the quality of participation and educational attainment of targeted children and young people in the educational process.

To bring together all relevant local stakeholders (home, school, youth, community, statutory and voluntary) to tackle early school leaving.

To offer positive supports in primary and post-primary schools towards the prevention of educational disadvantage.

To encourage young people who have left mainstream education to return to school.

To influence in a positive way policies relating to the prevention of early school leaving in the education system.

### SCP and Child Literacy

The Educational Research Centre's (Eivers, Shiel and Shortt, 2004) finding that up to 30% of young people in disadvantaged schools experience literacy difficulties re-enforces the need for SCP to support the existing provision of literacy in schools and offer direct support in literacy to targeted young people, where appropriate, particularly in after school settings and holiday programmes.

SCP has recently engaged in a consultation process with local projects to identify the core strategies comprising an effective early school leaving prevention programme. Of the sixteen strategies identified as core within the School Completion Programme 'Learning Support / Literacy and Numeracy Support' was identified as seventh on the list. While SCP personnel are not directly involved in the delivery of learning support / literacy and numeracy support, they do support and enhance the work of class teachers and Resource teachers in agreement with school administrations.

The rationale for SCP personnel to be involved in supporting and enhancing the learning support framework in schools and communities experiencing disadvantage is a sound one. According to Neild et al. (Educational Leadership, October 2007, Vol. 65, No. 2: pp. 28-33) 'a high percentage of dropouts send distress signals in the middle grades, long before they actually drop out of school'. Furthermore, in research carried out in the U.S. by the authors, they found that a 6th grader (on average, 12 years old) with even one of the following four signals had at least a three in four chance of dropping out in high school:

A final grade of F in Maths.

A final grade of F in English.

Attendance below 80 per cent for the year.

A final 'unsatisfactory' behaviour mark in at least one class.

International research work (for example, Brooks et al. and the National Dropout Prevention Center) has also identified the value of literacy and numeracy support as a

key component of early school leaving prevention programmes. Brooks et al. identify a key strategy in this area 'to provide activities to increase literacy and numeracy skills' whereas the National Dropout Prevention Center focuses attention on 'early literacy development'. In short, the relationship between poor literacy and numeracy skills and potential early school leaving has an evidence-base in educational research. Therefore, initiatives like SCP has a role in trying to support schools and communities in trying to address poor literacy and numeracy skills that can lead to poor educational outcomes, early school leaving, unemployment and social exclusion.

### Activities

Activities in the School Completion Programme are offered in-school, after school, out-of-school and during holiday time.

#### SCP initiatives / interventions supporting Child Literacy

As initiatives / interventions within SCP are provided in-school, after-school, out-of-school and during holiday time, SCP projects have opportunities to support literacy and numeracy development in young people identified at risk of early school leaving in a number of different settings.

In-school – SCP personnel support and enhance the in-school learning support / literacy and numeracy support framework. For example:

- By providing support to reading programmes, literacy programmes, maths programmes (through funding and / or personnel),
- Small group work / one to one work (SCP personnel involved in literacy and numeracy support in the classroom).
- Breakfast clubs (opportunity to support young people who may have difficulties before entering the classroom, including homework completion).
- By providing funding / personnel to interventions such as Reading Therapy, Drama tuition, Computer Clubs, Music Tuition.

After school – SCP personnel can provide young people identified at risk of early school leaving (and others in order to prevent stigmatisation) a range of supports out of the classroom, which directly and indirectly supports literacy and numeracy development. For example:

- Homework clubs – according to SCP data, 57 out of the original 82 projects provided homework clubs in 2006 / 2007. Homework clubs provide young people with an opportunity to focus on homework completion in a more relaxed setting. Homework clubs are particularly well attended at primary level.
- After school clubs – which focus on homework completion as well as other activities that tap into the multiple intelligences of young people (e.g. sports, drama, art, music, computer skills, dance, cookery).

Additional subject support / tuition – particularly at post-primary level.

Out-of-school – SCP's work in this area is primarily at post-primary level. SCP works alongside schools and other services (for example, NEWB and HSCL) to ensure that young people who are out of the school system acquire educational support and / or progress to other educational opportunities (including the return to mainstream school).

Holiday time - The recommendation by the Education Research Centre (Eivers, Shiel, and Shortt, 2004) that "schools alone cannot redress educational disadvantage" bears out the emphasis in the School Completion Programme of an integrated approach in working with local communities and agencies in addressing the problem of early school leaving. This recommendation also underlines the importance of holiday literacy programmes such as "Literacy Through the Arts" where a multiple intelligence approach is adopted or Summer Reading Programmes where parents and local services are involved in supporting the young person in improving literacy skills.

Holiday time supports put in place by SCP provide an opportunity to support young people at risk of early school leaving during their free time. According to research conducted by Borman and Dowling in the U.S. (Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis Vol. 28, No. 1 pp 25-48, Spring 2006) 'summer slide has a particularly harmful impact on the reading achievement of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Low SES children's reading skill levels fall approximately 3 months behind those of their middle class peers'. Some SCP holiday time interventions focus on literacy and numeracy development. However, the majority do not. Research from the U.K. also indicates that evaluations of summer programmes focus on social and personal development outcomes rather than academic outcomes (Mason et al (2000) Research Brief No. 200, Department for Education and Employment: UK). The identification of best practice that focuses on literacy and numeracy development in the summer months would be a welcome addition to the body of knowledge in this area.

SCP initiatives in this area include:

- English classes for International students – Arklow / Rathdrum / Dunlavin SCP
- Summer language school (for students with poor language and literacy skills) – Bray North SCP
- Summer programme - literacy / phonics – Caritas College SCP
- Literacy through the arts summer programme – Greenhills SCP
- Literacy programme – Leitros SCP
- Film making course – North Mayo SCP
- Language development programme (for International students) / Developing literacy through activity primary school – Westside Galway SCP
- Literacy and sport summer school – St. Dominic's / Old Bawn SCP
- Summer Reading Club – Collinstown Park SCP.

## Identifying Good Practice

Please do not hesitate to contact the SCP National Co-ordination Team if you would like to organise a study visit to a local SCP project.

## Some final observations

The focus of the project team should also be on oracy and numeracy skills. Failure rates in Foundation / Ordinary level Maths indicate that a large cohort of students have poor numeracy skills. Research in the U.K. (Mary Kellett and Aqsa Dar, 2007 Children Researching Links Between Poverty and Literacy: Joseph Rowntree Foundation) found that children from affluent backgrounds had ample opportunity to 'practise their private confidence' in reading aloud. "Children identified reading aloud and writing as activities requiring 'public confidence' and needed a lot of 'private' practice. A striking characteristic of children from affluent backgrounds was how easy it was for them to access opportunities for 'private confidence' building whereas children from low-income backgrounds had little, if any, opportunity for this". Strategies to improve literacy skills, numeracy skills and oracy skills need to go hand in hand.

In-service training through the Primary Professional Support Service (or equivalent body) should be delivered to all practitioners involved in delivering and supporting literacy / numeracy development. Transference of knowledge between formal, non-formal, childcare sectors is key to ensure consistent approach.

While the focus of the project team seems to be at primary level, it is important that there is a focus on literacy and numeracy at post-primary as well. Poor literacy and numeracy skills are early warning signs of potential early school leaving. Students might survive primary school with poor literacy and /or numeracy skills but transferring to post-primary with poor literacy and numeracy skills can be devastating to a student trying to cope with a number of subjects and less teacher attention. Ensuring that students have access to JCSP, LCA, Resource hours, special needs assistants etc. is key.

Cutting back on resources to particularly vulnerable groups e.g. newcomer students losing Language Support teachers, Travellers losing capitation grants, cutbacks to DEIS school book scheme, reduction in LCA, LCVP and transition year funding etc. will only increase the level of inequality in education and potentially lead to social exclusion.

Improved mechanisms to track and assess the literacy/ numeracy improvements in young people identified in need of additional support, particularly in after-school settings and during holiday time.

IT provision is also a very effective way to improve literacy in young people.

Strategies in this area should be developed, particularly at primary level.

The ERC (Eivers, Shiel and Shortt, 2004) further recommends that that "integrated family support programmes with the full involvement of schools and with an increased emphasis on educational needs should be more widely

available". The DES has funded through the Literacy Support Project under the DEIS programme a number of family literacy programmes with a strong community emphasis. It would be important that good practice from this process be disseminated to all schools in order to enhance learning in developing family literacy.