

Minister for Education and Skills, Norma Foley

Department of Education and Skills

Marlborough Street

Dublin D01 RC96

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Roderic O’Gorman,

Department of Children and Youth Affairs,

Block 1

Miesian Plaza

50-58 Baggot Street Lower

Dublin D02 XW14

September 12th 2020

Dear Minister Norma Foley, Minister Roderic O’Gorman,

Our *Children in Care and the Education System National Working Group* has met over the past two years to identify a range of issues where children in care are being failed by the education system and need key system supports. Our working group membership includes representatives from the INTO, Fórsa, Children's Rights Alliance, National Parent's Council Primary and Early Years, Empowering People in Care (EPIC), Focus Ireland, Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA), Care Leavers’ Network, Educational Disadvantage Centre, DCU, Maynooth University, DCU and Maynooth Access Services.

We are writing to you to request a high level national working group to address the cross-departmental responsibilities of the State to children in care, with a specific focus on meeting their holistic educational needs in a coordinated way across all age levels – and to address the current glaring strategic gap in the education system on this issue.

The majority of children in the care of the state (under Tusla) live with foster carers. According to current Tusla figures, there are 6,029 children in care, of which 92.1% were placed in foster care (26.3% of those in foster care being placed in relative foster care). It is estimated that in every primary school in Ireland there is at least one young person in that school who is in care and in every secondary school there are between 4 and 5 young people in care.

Our Working Group has identified a range of key questions and issues for consideration at an official level by an interdepartmental group in your ministries. These key questions and themes include the following:

Which ministry is responsible for leading state policy regarding children in the care of the state, and which Ministries share /have responsibility, at any level, for children in the care of the state? Are CIC over-represented in the suspension/exclusion groups? As CIC experience trauma, loss and attachment difficulties where are the school based emotional counselling/therapeutic supports for this and other vulnerable groups? Where are the other additional mentoring supports in schools for these students and their carers? Where is the category for children in care in the DES databases of POD (Primary Online Database) and PPOD (Postprimary Online Database)? Where are strategies to meet the needs of CIC evident in whole school plans? How embedded are trauma informed and attachment aware practices, training and policies in education at all levels?

Is there a stated policy on school admissions and CIC? Are children's rights to privacy being upheld? Where are these children and young people's voices being heard to ensure they are listened to and involved in all decisions and plans for his/her educational care? Is there enough being done around data collection, and tracking of CIC? What plans are in place to track educational outcomes for these children and what is the status of the 10-year longitudinal study recommended by the Ryan Report? Are the communication channels between social services, foster parents and schools too vague and what are these currently? Do foster carers/kinship carers have sufficient knowledge of the children's educational rights?

How can CIC be better recognised as a distinct group as part of a higher education access strategy? How are CIC strategically supported by schools and other services in the transition from primary to postprimary school? What is the CPD and Initial Teacher education strategy for working with current and future teachers to support these students' complex needs? As current supports for SNA/Resource hours rest with each

school as distinct from the pupil themselves, a child can potentially go from allocated to unallocated if they move school, how is this to be remedied?

If a care leaver takes a gap year they need to be supported in retaining supports and entitlements, with such aftercare support continuing until age 25. Better supports for their obtaining the Back to Education Allowance Scheme are also required for those over 25. Financial supports for access to third level including through a national scholarship scheme for care leavers as mature students are required. A Department of Education and Skills circular to all third level education providers is required to explain the needs of this vulnerable group to staff. The Scottish Government has recently announced the removal of the 26-years age cap on the care-experienced student bursary in time for the start of the 2020-21 academic year. People with experience of care often do not feel ready to start further or higher education immediately after leaving school –this will support them into either further or higher education at whatever point in life they feel they are ready, regardless of their age.

These are by no means the only issues to be examined in this complex area. It is to be noted that we submitted, through the Care Leavers' Network, some recommendations in the Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education and Inequality and Disadvantage and Barriers to Education of May 2019. It is to be highlighted that we consulted with young people in care (through our EPIC Youth Council) around their experiences of the school system while in care as part of the process of identifying key issues. The importance of education for children in care is amplified due to the fact that when children leave care, financial assistance through aftercare services are only offered if the young person is in some form of progressive education.

We are requesting a meeting with you and your officials to discuss these issues and the terms of reference and composition of such a high level cross-departmental national working group.

Looking forward to your response,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Downes', written in a cursive style.

Dr Paul Downes

Chairperson, Children in Care and the
Education System National Working Group, DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre

Susan Carey; Terry Dignan	EPIC (Empowering People in Care)
Wayne Dignam;	Care Leavers' Network
Tanya Ward; Saoirse Brady	Children's Rights Alliance
Cathy McLoughlin; Margaret Lamont	DCU Access Service
Kevin Callinan; Clare Keaveney	Fórsa
Alison Connolly; Deirdre Woods	Focus Ireland
Catherine Bond; Anne McCluskey	IFCA
Shane Loftus	INTO
Cáit Ní Murchu	Kilkenny SCP
Áine Lynch	National Parents Council
Bridget Gormley; Rose Ryan	NUIM Access Service
Professor Aislinn O'Donnell; Dr Katriona O'Sullivan; Dr Anthony Malone; Dr Etain Quigley	NUIM

