PAUL Partnership Submission to DES

Draft Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People

Background

The PAUL Partnership has 20 years experience of supporting programmes tackling educational disadvantage in Limerick. In particular, PAUL Partnership believes that learning in out-of-school, non-formal community based settings is a vital component of the state’s investment in children. To this end PAUL has focused its work on programmes which support learning in this environment and which building effective collaboration between school and community.

PAUL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of this plan, and recognises that the need for such a plan is based on evidence for the need to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of young people, as found in recent research - ‘Incidental Inspections 2010’ and Education Research Centre’s ‘National Assessment and English Reading 2009’.

The Role of the Parent

It is important to recognise that the first and primary educator of the child is the parent. Desforges and Abouchaar in their review for UK Dept of Education and Skills in 2003 found that parental involvement in the form of ‘at home good parenting’ had a significant positive effect on children’s achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment had been controlled. The strong impact particularly concerns the creation of a high home learning environment. This principle will be particularly important considering section 7 of the plan ‘Enabling parents and communities to support their children’s literacy and numeracy development’; which should receive a lot more focus and priority (including allocation of resources) if the goals of the plan are to be realised.

Resourcing the Plan

There needs to be a commitment to resourcing many of the worthwhile recommendations this plan. The increased emphasis placed on literacy and numeracy should not result in a reduction of other resources in the school system. This would also apply to the issue of time in the school day; for example schools finding it difficult to create the time to carry out self-evaluation and to plan for literacy and numeracy teaching in the school. As pointed out by the teacher unions in their initial comments on the plan, the under-resourcing of schools and large class sizes will make it more difficult to implement many of the recommendations in this plan.

Yvonne Lane, Lifelong Learning Facilitator, PAUL Partnership, January 2011
Prioritising literacy & numeracy teaching in pre-schools and schools

The recommendations around lengthening the Teacher Education programmes are welcome; likewise the extra provision of in-service training on literacy and numeracy education for teachers is also welcome.

Many of the DEIS primary schools in Limerick are particularly concerned about the recommendation to reduce the amount of time spent on arts subjects over time, in order to allow teachers to spend increased hours (by 3 hours per week) teaching literacy and numeracy. These arts subjects, such as Drama, Music, and Visual Arts are important in helping children to develop in terms of self-esteem, confidence, and an ability to express themselves; all of which are critical for children in developing stronger literacy and numeracy skills. If children in disadvantaged schools are not given sufficient opportunity to explore their feelings and ideas; the development of other skills, including literacy and numeracy will actually become more difficult. There should be a much more cross-curricular approach; where literacy and numeracy skills taught and used within these arts subjects.

Targeting Available Additional Resources on Learners at Risk

There needs to be a special and increased case made for disadvantage within the Plan. The present recommendations in the plan in this section ‘Targeting available additional resources on learners at risk of failure to achieve adequate levels of literacy and numeracy’ are inadequate. There is a recommendation in this section to target the development of the teaching of literacy and numeracy in DEIS schools: through re-focusing the work of existing DEIS cuititheoiri and redeployment of other posts to create a team of 20 advisors to work with DEIS primary and post-primary schools and Youthreach staff on the teaching and assessment of literacy and numeracy. While support around literacy and numeracy for DEIS and Youthreach is welcome; 20 advisors for the entire country for the DEIS schools appears minimal; and also seems to indicate a reduction in support from the redeployed posts. (Also, which ‘other posts’ are to be redeployed; as are these to be further loss of support to DEIS; similar to the withdrawal from September 2011 of 42 visiting teachers for Travellers– which was a vital support for disadvantage)

There is a welcome focus on Youthreach in this section, in that it recognises that second-chance sector; however, if the issue of meeting the needs of these second chance learners is to be adequately addressed, similar supports to those recommended in Section 2 (‘Improving Teachers’ Teachers’ and ECCE Practitioners’ Professional Practice’) around in-service training should also be provided for Youthreach teachers/tutors; both as teachers of literacy and numeracy and also across the curriculum in Youthreach.

Fostering Continuous Improvement in Literacy and Numeracy in Schools

This initiative “Schools like ours” outlined on page 41 of the draft plan proposes to offer schools access to data on standards achieved on standardised achievement tests of its own school and also data from “matched schools” – i.e. schools operating in similar socio-economic contexts. While standardised tests are useful for schools in a number of ways; this proposed grouping of amalgamated test data for schools in similar environments appears to simply reinforce disadvantage and what is expected of each school. For example a DEIS band 1 school in a (disadvantaged) urban area would not be expected to compare their results with a school in a more affluent area; which seems worrying.

Yvonne Lane, Lifelong Learning Facilitator, PAUL Partnership, January 2011
Enabling parents and communities to support their children’s literacy and numeracy development’

It is a matter of concern that this is one of the shortest sections in the Draft Plan; given the importance of the involvement of family in the child’s education.

Also, the plan thus far has very much focused on the pre-school in ECCE and the primary and post-primary school; supporting the practitioners and school staffs. There is however a need to embrace much more a “continuum of care” approach. The Barnardos ‘Written Out Written Off’ report (2009) highlighted the fact that services are fragmented and often only able to react to cases of highest concern rather than being proactive to support all children at risk. For DEIS schools this lack of support presents real challenges in their ability to enable all disadvantaged children to reach their educational potential. The Barnardos report also highlighted that while supports may be offered to assist a child in improving their educational performance, often schools have difficulty in addressing the child’s emotional and behavioural problems which are also outside the remit of much education related support services such as NEWB. This represents the real lack of holistic view of the child and their family.

In response to this challenge highlighted, we would recommend that there is more focus on building the capacity of parents to support their learning and development; including literacy and numeracy. Family literacy programmes mentioned in the plan need to further resourced and supported; and also this links between these programmes and the local schools. It is surprising that while a key function of the work of the Home School Liaison teacher is supporting these links and engaging the parents in these programmes, that the HSCL role is not mentioned at all in the plan. Furthermore it is not just literacy programmes that need to be supported but also informal, creative programmes (eg. Storysacks) where literacy is a strong component.

The proposal to increase lengthening the Teacher Education programmes in the earlier Prioritising Literacy and Numeracy Teaching in Schools and Pre-schools Section is welcome, and the Partnership would hope that as part of there would be an increased emphasis on training for teachers in parental involvement; and also that this would be included undergraduate at in-service levels. A key recommendation of the ‘Family Involvement in Education’ report (commissioned by Planet, together with Pobal and launched in 2008) stated that such a parent involvement module would train teachers to work with parents in a consultative fashion, as partners in education, and to collaborate with other relevant providers in the community; thus prioritizing family needs over institutional agendas.

The Incredible Years Programme in Limerick takes a more holistic view, looking at the social, behavioural, and emotional needs of children which must be supported. The DES should provide core mainstream funding for these evidence-based programmes, which have proven highly effective in bringing parents, teachers and providers together to create positive outcomes for children.

True early intervention for children means working with the parents from birth of the child for best results. This requires link with primary care provision. A Consortium in Limerick ‘Start Right Limerick’ has applied for funding under the ‘National Early Years Access Initiative’ in order to enhance the capacity of parents, families and services to work collaboratively to improve the health and well-being of children, with a particular focus on learning and development. This proposed initiative also seeks to foster collaborative work practices in the early years’ sector among service providers, other professional groups, parents and families.

Another recommendation which should be included in the plan is to support and increase access to out of school and summer time provision for children. Teachers often cite dropping standards in literacy and numeracy among their students, particularly in areas of disadvantage each September when children return to school. The Community Sector, including the Northside Learning Hub (www.learninghub.ie) in

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Limerick and links with the School Completion Programme to provide an excellent service in incorporating literacy and numeracy education into out of school summer programmes.

One suggestion in order to break the cycle of disadvantage is to provide a module at post primary level on caring for children; perhaps best placed as part of SPHE. This would reinforce early on the important role that a parent has in the education of their child.

In relation to the recommendation around the national campaign in the media in Section 7, this may be quite effective in raising parents’ aspirations; and the important role they can play in their child’s education.