

IMPACT trade union

Submission to the consultation on the Department of Education and Skills Statement of Strategy 2016-2018

8<sup>th</sup> June 2016

Please respond to: Kevin Callinan, Deputy General Secretary

## **Introduction**

IMPACT is Ireland's largest public service union with members in education, health, local authorities and the civil service. The union also represents staff in the commercial, voluntary and semi-state sectors. In all, IMPACT has over 56,000 members including 10,000 in the education sector.

IMPACT is the biggest representative voice for non-teaching education staff in Ireland. The union represents a wide range of education professions and grades including special needs assistants, school secretaries and caretakers, school completion staff, early years' staff, and clerical and administrative staff in the education and training boards and institutes of technology. IMPACT also represents a range of specialists employed by the Department of Education and Skills including primary and secondary schools inspectors, staff in the National Educational Psychology Service, and special educational needs organisers in the National Council for Special Education.

The diverse range of IMPACT's membership in education and beyond gives the union a perspective that transcends specific educational services, as well as a particular expertise in many discrete aspects of education policy.

The DES call for submissions says that it is not necessary to follow the precise format of the DES consultation paper. Because of the diversity of IMPACT's expertise in the education sector, we are putting forward this single submission to the consultation on the Department of Education and Skills' Statement of Strategy 2016-2018. Although this submission does not follow the precise format of the DES consultation paper, we have taken account of the content and format of the consultation paper, as well as the relevant sections of the Programme for Government.

IMPACT would welcome the opportunity to discuss or elaborate on any or all of the points raised in this submission.

## **Principles of education policy and strategy**

The 2016-2018 education strategy should develop policy and practice in ways that:

- Maintain and improve the quality of Ireland's education services
- Place due weight on the importance of education and skills during all life phases including early years, primary, secondary, third level, and lifelong learning
- Place priority on equality of access to high-quality education and positive educational outcomes (including by tackling educational disadvantage), regardless of economic background or circumstances, and inclusive of people with disabilities, throughout these life phases

- Promote plurality and a broad understanding of the world we live in
- Provide choice and diversity that fosters personal growth, expression and fulfillment
- Give students the skills, knowledge and understanding they need for quality and fulfilling employment and careers
- Ensure that Ireland has the skills and knowledge necessary to compete in the modern global economy
- Respect all the people who work in the education sector, regardless of their role.

### **Improving access to education by tackling disadvantage**

Now that Ireland's economic recovery is strengthening, IMPACT believes there is significant scope to strengthen measures to tackle educational disadvantage in the period 2016-2018 and beyond. This should include action in the following areas:

- Support for early childhood provision
- Adequate support for children with special needs
- Development of the DEIS programme
- Access to higher education.

### ***Support for early childhood provision***

There is a clear need for enhanced investment in the early childhood sector. Evidence shows that investment in early years' services delivers huge benefits for children, particularly those from lower income backgrounds, and for society and the economy more generally. Yet Ireland spends just 0.2% of GDP on childcare, compared to an OECD average of 0.8%. The education strategy should include a commitment to sustained investment in early years to at least bring Ireland's state investment up to the OECD average. Investment should be linked to top quality service provision which, in turn, requires the professionalisation of all early years' staff to enable them to deliver the range and quality of services that children need and parents demand, and to ensure that the people who provide services are properly rewarded with decent pay, regular working hours, and a modern career structure.

Like others, IMPACT welcomed the additional free pre-school year, which was announced in Budget 2016. However, the programme's inadequate capitation payment is disincentivising providers and driving down wages by effectively requiring providers to provide services 'below cost'. A recent [ICTU survey](#) found that, although Irish parents pay dearly for pre-school care, early years staff (including well-qualified workers) can earn as little as €5,150 a year in an increasingly-casualised sector. Low pay, poor career prospects, and long periods off-payroll during the summer months, damage service quality by driving staff out of the sector.

Although responsibility for early years services rests with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the fact that children who fall behind in early years rarely, if ever, catch up should make proper provision of these services a top priority for our education strategy. [Invitation for submissions on early childhood care and education.](#)

### ***Adequate support for children with special needs***

IMPACT welcomed the announcement of additional special needs assistant posts in Budget 2016, but believes that a continued expansion of the service will be required in 2016-2018, and beyond, in order to meet growing demand. The union has expressed its concern about the fragmentation of SNA posts, and the impact this has on service consistency and quality, to the DES on a number of occasions. We are continuing to monitor the agreed measures that have been put in place to address this issue.

The issue of certainty over the allocation of special needs provision, including the timeliness of the publication of allocations in advance of each school year, is a perennial problem that should be addressed in the education strategy for 2016-2018. This should include immediate action on the inadequate recruitment of special educational needs organisers.

IMPACT believes a new emphasis on the development of the SNA role, including access to continuous professional development for SNAs, is required to ensure the development of the service. To this end, IMPACT believes that the implementation of the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection's [report on the role of the special needs assistant](#) should be a priority in the new education strategy. [IMPACT's submission to Joint Oireachtas committee](#) should be read as part of this submission.

### ***Development of the DEIS programme***

IMPACT set out its response to ESRI's 2015 report *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS* in its response to the DES stakeholder consultation on the assessment of DEIS, which should be considered as part of this submission. We place particular emphasis on the crucial role of the schools completion programme (SCP) in tackling educational disadvantage, which is explored in some detail in the IMPACT submission [Assessment of DEIS Programme Template for Stakeholder Consultation](#).

The viability of many SCP programmes has been compromised by repeated funding cuts over recent years. In this respect, our publication [The future of the School Completion Programme: Addressing key Issues in educational disadvantage](#) should be considered as part of this submission.

The IMPACT submission to the DES stakeholder consultation on the assessment of DEIS also outlined a number of measures that are necessary to address gaps in DEIS I, including three priority areas of food poverty and hunger prevention in schools, arts and social inclusion in education strategy, and the need for enhanced emotional and mental health supports. On mental health supports, IMPACT welcomes the Programme for Government's commitment to a limited expansion in staffing in the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), which has been subject to strict staffing restrictions since 2008 – a period in which the school population has increased by 50,000. In this respect, our publication [The Way Forward: A School Psychological Service for All Children and Young People](#) should be considered as part of this submission.

## ***Access to higher education***

IMPACT's submission to the Higher Education Council's consultation '[Towards the Development of a New National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Educations](#)' should be considered as part of this submission. The IMPACT submission makes observations on ten issues: financial barriers, equity of access as a strategic priority, higher education in the community, flexible learning and the concerns of students with disabilities, mature students, traveller students, LGBTQ students, migrant students, and international students.

## **Future role and function of Education and Training Boards (ETBs)**

The Education and Training Boards (formerly VECs) have experienced phenomenal change since the Further Education and Training Act became law in 2013. This has included the transfer of staff from FÁS into the newly-established SOLAS and into the ETBs, which were themselves created under separate legislation that followed the reduction of the number of VECs from 33 to 16. Staff concerns over the role and functions of ETBs led to an agreement (brokered by the Labour Relations Commission) on a process between DES/ETBI and IMPACT, to deal with the change programme that includes future roles and functions. IMPACT still has serious concerns about these matters, which should be addressed in the 2016-2018 Statement of Strategy.

## **Institutes of technology and technological universities**

The March 2014 IMPACT submission to the [Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection](#) should be read as part of this submission.

Staff in these institutions are committed to creating a modern third-level sector true to the values that historically underpinned ITs, RTCs and VECs. The challenge is to achieve this against the backdrop of increasing student numbers and the sustained funding crisis of recent years.

Among other things, our submission to the joint Oireachtas inquiry argued that:

- There should be no diminution of the social function of ITs/technological universities
- The current broad geographical and demographic scope of ITs should be sustained
- There must be a clear role for smaller institutes that are not comprehended by mergers of ITs
- The new institutions must continue to co-operate with staff representatives to ensure sustainable operational structures and staff terms and conditions
- The outsourcing provisions of existing industrial relations agreements must be respected during and after the establishment of technical universities.

## **Higher education funding**

A separate paper on higher education funding is being submitted by IMPACT along with the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and SIPTU, the Teachers' Union of Ireland and the Irish Federation of University Teachers.

## **National Skills Strategy**

IMPACT's submission to the [DES National Skills Strategy \(2015\)](#) should be considered as part of this submission.

### **Easing restrictions on staff numbers**

IMPACT has welcomed the easing (albeit limited) of recruitment restrictions in some parts of the education sector, as well as Programme for Government commitments to future recruitment in certain areas. However, in the context of a strengthening economic recovery, together with demographic and other challenges facing the sector, it is essential that further and more rapid recruitment programmes are now undertaken in a number of areas.

The recruitment moratorium, and the strict application of employment control frameworks (ECFs), continues to place a huge burden on services and the people who deliver them. In some cases, it has led to the inappropriate use of contract staff, internships, and other labour market activation programmes.

A number of professions and grades represented by IMPACT have outlined to the DES the impact of staff reductions and restrictions on the services they provide. These include special needs assistants, special educational needs organisers, NEPS staff, school completion officers, primary and post-primary inspectors, and staff in institutes of technology and ETBs.

Although staff shortages in so-called 'frontline' roles most frequently capture official and political attention, we stress that, while administrative and other support staff constitute a relative small proportion of education staff, they perform functions vital to the effective delivery of education services at all levels. They have also felt the full force of ECFs in recent years, and should be included in the easing of staffing restrictions in the coming period.

### **Two-tier education system: School secretaries and caretakers**

Secretaries and caretakers play a central supporting role in our schools. Yet the continuing absence of national pay and conditions for the many that are paid from school ancillary grants perpetuates a low-pay, two-tier system. Welcome and overdue pay increases were agreed last year, along with the introduction of collective bargaining for this group, following an arbitration process facilitated by the Lansdowne Road agreement. However, the two-tier system remains in place and should be addressed in the 2016-2018 education strategy.

ENDS

Wed 15/06/2016 16:32

I refer to IMPACT's Submission to the DES Statement of Strategy 2016-2018. We omitted to refer to the Education and Welfare Service.

This is the only service with the Statutory Remit to ensure that each child attends a recognised school or otherwise receives a certain minimum education. The service also assists in the formulation and implementation of policies and objectives of the Government concerning the education of children.

Our IMPACT membership comprises Regional Managers, Senior Educational Welfare Officers, Educational Welfare Officers and Clerical/Administration staff.

Educational Welfare Officers have frontline responsibility for vindicating a child's right to education.

The depleted number of Educational Welfare Officers significantly compromises the capacity to carry out their full remit under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

The recommended number of Educational Welfare Officers required to provide a National Service is 360. The service is currently operating with 73 plus 9 Senior Educational Welfare Officers and 4 Regional Managers. Despite their dwindling numbers they continue to keep the service afloat for the sake of the children and their families.

Please treat this letter as an addendum to our submission.

Yours faithfully

Kevin Callinan  
Deputy General Secretary

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