

Report Card 2009 TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Jillian van Turnhout:

So let us begin, *The Children's Rights Alliance Report Card 2009* is the first of an annual publication. Each year, the Irish State judges the performance of our children through the Junior Cert and Leaving Cert examinations. We have decided that each January, through our annual Report Card, we will give our judgement on the performance of the Irish Government in honouring its commitments to our children. Fair's fair.

Report Card 2009 looks at 25 Government commitments in the areas of education, health, material wellbeing and safeguarding childhood. The commitments come from three Government policy documents: that's the social partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*; the current *Programme for Government*, and the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion*.

So, how's our Government doing? Unfortunately, the performance is deeply disappointing. It scrapes a D average in *Report Card 2009*.

What does a D mean though for children? It means that:

- Too many children in Ireland are being denied the fundamental building blocks to live healthy and productive lives
- Thousands of children will fail to reach their unique potential
- Many children will become a detrimental, long-term financial cost to our society as a whole

Of the 25 commitments, 12 are lagging seriously behind, seven lack effective monitoring structures or procedures. And not all of the failings can be linked to a lack of funding, or to the current economic troubles.

The Government can improve its performance. *Report Card 2009* also sets out some **immediate actions** the Government must take to deliver its own promises. While some of these actions are dependent on increased funding, others require:

- Departments to work together;
- Processes and practice to be reformed;
- Transparent decision-taking and monitoring; and
- Accountability in the face of inaction.

So, to look at the first four areas:

EDUCATION

To give you a brief overview, the Government got an overall 'D' in Education.

I think this dismal grade really reflects the Government's failure to recognise the value of early intervention and preventive measures in education, which allow problems to be addressed before they become full scale crises.

MATERIAL WELLBEING

The Government got a C- in material wellbeing.

This grade reflects a mixed performance by Government. There have been marked increases in child income support, but the lack of access to essential public services means that poor children are still left wanting.

Ireland ranks 21st of the 27 EU countries on child poverty and comes joint 25th in the 30 OECD countries. This is a shameful position for what was, up to recently, one of the richest countries in the EU.

We can, and we should, do better.

HEALTH

The Government gets a grade D- in health. This is its worst grade.

A 'D-' grade is shameful, given that health is central to a child's wellbeing. This unacceptable performance is contrary to Government commitments and it shows an unwillingness to balance investment between early intervention and preventive services, and hospital care.

SAFEGUARDING CHILDHOOD

And finally, but certainly not least, the Government gets a grade C in safeguarding childhood. This is its best mark.

This section looks at a variety of areas: play and recreation, school buildings, alcohol, and sexual health and relationships. The Government got its best grade in play, but failed to impress in alcohol.

Perhaps some lessons to learn from Report Card 2009

- There are plenty of good policy commitments to children, but on the whole they are not being honoured. Almost half of those looked at by the Alliance were 'lagging seriously behind' schedule
- There is a lack of accountability to commitments, and it appears, a lack of concern among Government and in the system when commitments are not honoured. In some departments, commitments have little more value than the paper that they are written on.
- Monitoring and evaluation processes are often lacking. Yet these are key to measuring how the Government is doing, and providing good analysis as to what progress is or is not being made.

In many instances, the Alliance had to do significant digging to find the facts we needed. Commitments should have a life beyond their paper existence.

- There is a failure among Government departments and agencies to work together to achieve common aims. This is not acceptable, particularly now that money is tight and being efficient is absolutely critical.

I'm now going to just hand over to Justice Catherine McGuinness and she's going to share with us, just very briefly, what Report Card 2009 tells us about children's lives and she's going to give us a personal perspective.

Justice Catherine McGuinness: Good morning and thank you very much Jillian. In fact, I'm really, mainly going to stick to two areas of the Report – that on access to education and on access to healthcare. Perhaps, I suppose because, as not only a mother but also now a grandmother, whose grandchildren are going through education and who access the healthcare system, I have more personal experience, perhaps, in this area than in other areas of the Report. And I do think it's important to look at what the Government has said that it will do in these areas.

In access to education, our key overall objectives in education are to make each element of the system more inclusive and responsive to marginalised groups – and that's a very important aim. But it's also an aim, which I think in this year when we're celebrating the 90th anniversary of the social programme of the first Dáil, it brings home to us, perhaps, how far we've moved from what the people who were involved in the foundation of the State were aiming at in the social programme of the first Dáil, which set out the essential aim of the equality of all persons within the State, and that includes, obviously, equality in the educational system. And this, I think, we're very far from achieving.

Now, it's pointed out in the Report that the Department with regard to secondary schools, there's a comment on the enrolment policies and it is pointed out that the Department of Education itself, and their own audit of enrolment policies, indicated that second level special needs students, children of immigrants and Traveller children, are largely concentrated in local, vocational and community schools, with many voluntary schools effectively opting out of providing for these students. A guiding principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is non-discrimination; I think it has become clear not only from public comment, but also from the Department of Education's own audit, that there are areas where there are two very distinct levels, distinct tiers of education, and that's particularly true in the South Dublin area. And I can say that because I live in the South Dublin area, that there are certain schools who, as it were, provide all the back-up, or virtually all of the back-up, for children with special needs or children with less resources available, while others can afford to pay extremely high school fees and yet are receiving almost the same amount of support from the State. I think this is something that has to be looked at and the Government really needs to bite the bullet and to get a bit of courage and realise that they may have to offend some of their better off voters, by changing the way in which resources are distributed among schools, so as to correct enrolment policies and to try to avoid the effective exclusion of special needs children from certain schools. It's a radical political decision that's needed in this.

Just a few words also with regard to healthcare and, again, it is stated "every child should have access to world class health, personal, and social services" in the Government's own policy. Now, "world-class" is a word that is very frequently used. And I'm afraid I consider that "world-class" is a virtually

meaningless word. What “world” are you referring to? Are we suggesting that our children should have third world class health, personal and social services? What do we mean by “world-class”? Do we mean first class or what do we mean? And I think it is a bit ironic that they’re saying “world-class” here and perhaps reducing the level of access to healthcare and the level of healthcare that’s available. And it’s certainly true, as pointed out in the comment, that there is a very clear link between poverty and poor health and indeed poverty and the length of people’s lives, as can be seen particularly in the Traveller community, that they die very much younger than the rest of us. And this is also true of people who are living in deprived areas and so on.

There are certain areas, again as pointed out by Jillian’s research, like speech and language therapy, where it is extremely difficult for a child to get access to this. And delay and waiting lists are fatal in that particular area, because unless speech and language therapy is accessed at a very early age it doesn’t work nearly as well and it isn’t nearly as effective. So, all these comments are ones that any of us who live and work in this world can see, and figures are given here in the Report from research by the Outlaid Hospital Society in regard to the cost – the relatively small cost – of extending medical cards to children under 19 or, even more so, the extension of medical cards to children under five, to provide for free GP services. People are hesitant to go to their doctor if they have to pay a relatively large fee. And I noticed [...], during the weekend, I read in the newspaper a survey of prices going up and prices going down, and the one thing that strikingly had gone up in the last few months was the cost of a visit to the GP, which had gone up 10% when some food costs and clothing costs had actually gone down, so it is becoming more expensive to access healthcare if you don’t qualify for a medical card.

So all of these things really do need to be looked at and if we are going to give a fair move towards the sort of equality to all children that was envisaged in the programme of the first Dáil, then that’s the direction we need to be moving in. And I would like to thank the Children’s Rights Alliance for producing this very useful Report and all of the facts and comments that are contained in it.

Jillian: Thank you very, very much. I am now going to give the floor to the Chairperson of the Children’s Rights Alliance, Dr Nóirín Hayes.

Dr Nóirín Hayes: Good afternoon to you all. I was struck by a number of things that have been said by the previous two speakers and I’m going to take them as the frame around which I’m going to make my comments, which are going to be quite brief because they’re just about two sections of the Report. Jillian made the point in her overview that this isn’t about money, and that’s a message in the current climate that really needs to get out there fairly loudly - it’s actually about vision. Funnily enough, we have a vision for children in Ireland, which is nine years old and its part of a ten year National Children’s Strategy. And while I was sitting here, it occurred to me that it might be worth calling on my wonderful gizmo here to just get that and read it to you; to locate this Report Card within this context. Because Jillian said another thing which is really important and it is that we have *lots* of written policies and *lots* of written reports, but actually the way we ought to be measuring how we’re treating our children is by what’s happening, not what’s being said will happen. But the vision we have for children in Ireland is as follows: ‘An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens, with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential’. And I think that that’s the measure of what we should be trying to achieve and we have less than a year in which to achieve it, if we’re holding the National Children’s Strategy as our blueprint.

The two areas that I was asked to take a particular look at were the two areas which received an 'E': an 'E' means that it's unacceptable, taking steps in the wrong direction and not really having a positive impact on children. These two areas were Early Childhood Education and Mental Health. For those of you who know me, you will know that Early Childhood Education is an area that I've a particular interest in and could probably spend two hours, rather than two minutes, speaking on. But I am struck by a common thread in relation to these two areas – actually there is more than one common thread – but the first common thread that I noticed was that actually addressing Early Childhood Education and addressing Mental Health in the way that we have the documentation to say we will and should and possibly could address it, is about a prevention approach.

The facts in the Report, there is a certain commonality to the type of failure. Failure to spend – well, in Mental Health it was a failure to actually spend – there was earmarked money which didn't get spent. In Early Education, it's a bit different, there's been a huge spend but it is the direction of the spend; and that's where it isn't about money, it's about what we do with the money and the vision that we have. In relation to Mental Health, there was then a lack of action: "oh, yes, we have to create more beds, yes we have to target funding at children, yes we have to get over the waiting lists, and yes we will", but actually no we didn't. And that's where the problem is, it is actually getting it into action. In Early Education, there was a lack of prioritising of early education when push came to shove. And so, for example in the DEIS initiative, this initiative in the area of educational disadvantage where early childhood was for the first time written into an educational kind of policy, actually the little bit of that DEIS project which didn't get rolled out quite as quickly, and quite in the way it was meant to, and now not with quite as much money, was the bit about early education – and not the piece about the existing institutions.

I think it is a complex, actually, problem that we are dealing with in Ireland. And it's not going to be, simply, a slap on the wrist that is going to get the change. One of the examples of that is mentioned in the Report, a huge investment in directing funding to parents to purchase childcare, following the 2006 Budget – the money is immense: Half of that, directed towards subsidising and supporting the existence of childcare and early educational services whose existence is being funded in capital terms by the State, would have created a viable childcare and early childhood infrastructure, which could have been regulated and monitored to ensure that parents who couldn't afford access to it could be supported and those who could afford it, could pay the going rate. Linked into quality, that could have made an enormous difference to parents in terms of the costs of childcare and early education, and to the comfort they would have in knowing that their children were attending services – whether it was three days a week for a half day or five days a week for a full day – that were of a high-quality. There's a real rethink needed at Government level if they are going to rise above this 'E' in Early Childhood Care and Education.

And the same is undoubtedly true in the area of Mental Health – an area I don't know as much about. But I do know that there is an excellent document, with wonderful recommendations about how to improve the quality of life of children and young people who are suffering from mental health difficulties. We know that quality Early Childhood Education creates family environments and creates and supports children's development, so that mental health difficulties are less likely to happen. And we need to start thinking, in my view – the Government needs to start thinking – much more holistically about what it means to be a child in 21st Century Ireland and how, with the money we are now spending, we could make that money mean more to those children, so that the mark they get for Early

Childhood Education and the mark they get for Mental Health next time around will at least be a 'C' and moving towards an 'A'.

I think that we need to help the Government understand that the problem is not about money: it's about vision, it's about leadership, it's about thinking about children now and thinking about our society now, so that we can move into these difficult times feeling comfortable that our children are going to be well-cared for and they are going to be there for us, when we get old and grey and need them.

Jillian: Thank you very much, Nóirín.