

## Alternative and Out of School Education Provision

**Ask:** Establish a new model for alternative and out of school education provision. As part of this, publish a mapping of what provision currently exists and develop a new policy which recognises and strengthens the important role of alternative education and out of school provision.

**Problem:** Almost nine per cent of young people leave school early.<sup>i ii</sup> This rises to 15.2 per cent in disadvantaged areas.<sup>iii</sup> Each year 4,500 young people drop out of school before completing their Junior Cert.<sup>iv</sup>

Although patterns of early school leaving continue to differ across EU national contexts and systems of education, research consistently shows that a disproportionate number of young people who leave school early are from disadvantaged social class backgrounds.<sup>v</sup> Both national and international studies show that early school leavers have common characteristics in that they are more likely to be male, have low school attainment, experience behavioural problems, have ongoing social, emotional or health issues, have special educational needs, are living in poverty and have ill-health or have experienced trauma.<sup>vi</sup> Students in the lowest streamed class are 13 times more likely to leave school early compared to those in mixed ability classes.<sup>vii</sup>

Alternative education has developed in many jurisdictions as a response to state-provided mainstream education.<sup>viii</sup> International experience indicates that alternative education providers are informal, have smaller classes with a student-centred curriculum and a focus on experiential learning to support the personal, professional, and emotional development of each student.<sup>ix</sup>

Internationally there is no one defined purpose of alternative education systems. Broadly, systems fall into one of two categories:

1. Supporting young people at risk by way of last chance education focused on providing alternative education pathways or focusing on reintegration into mainstream education.<sup>x</sup>
2. Popular innovation models focusing on learning choice.<sup>xi</sup>

Research has shown that there are many positive outcomes of alternative education for children including:

1. Improvements in literacy and numeracy with positive engagement with assessments and exams.
2. Improved engagement with studies and improved rates of attendance and improvements in behaviour.
3. The development of students' aspirations and future pathways to work and education.
4. Increased self-esteem, well-being and resilience levels for students and increased positive community engagement.<sup>xii</sup>

The Education Welfare Act 2000 (as amended) provides for children in education, other than a recognised school, to register with the Child and Family Agency.<sup>xiii</sup> The Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) works to support young people who are at risk of being out of school and support them to remain or re-engage in education.

Young people who leave school before the age of 16 have limited<sup>xiv</sup> state-funded opportunities for continuing their education. Except for Youthreach, which is a state-provided programme of 'second chance' education, the area of alternative education is not explicitly defined and mentioned in the Irish education system.<sup>xv</sup> While Youthreach supports some students in their progression in education, it does not cater for all of their needs. In this context some alternative education providers have stepped in to provide education at both Junior and Leaving Cert level, however there is no funding line to support it and a lack of information on the types and numbers of alternative programmes of education in Ireland.

In an evaluation of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund it was noted that those who leave school early are experiencing 'a high complexity of challenges and needs' in the area of mental health, wellbeing, engagement with work or education, and possible involvement with the judicial system, while also being three times more likely to be unemployed than others aged 18-24 who are not early school leavers'.<sup>xvi</sup> Two of the organisations who were part of the evaluation, Cork Life Centre<sup>xvii</sup> and iScoil<sup>xviii</sup> provide alternative education for children and young people who are not in mainstream education. In the evaluation it was reported that:

- 32 per cent of students in Cork Life Centre were continuously suspended from mainstream schools.
- 73 per cent of students in Cork Life Centre were identified with one or more diagnosis or a special educational need (e.g., behavioural, social, emotional or learning need).
- Of the 220 students in iScoil many had mental health issues, general health issues, behavioural issues, learning disabilities, and complex family situations.<sup>xix</sup>

A disproportionate number of young people who have experienced poverty become what is termed "early school leavers".<sup>xx</sup> One of the main misconceptions about early school leavers is that they are academically incapable of completing mainstream education, however, 53 per cent will continue their education in facilities such as a voluntary education setting or Youthreach where they can receive necessary support and continue a more participant-centre form of education.<sup>xxi</sup>

Beyond registration with Tusla, there is no formal funding/regulation programme for alternative education providers in Ireland.<sup>xxii</sup> The Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS) function in Tusla is responsible for the regulation of provision for education in places other than recognised schools.<sup>xxiii</sup> Current alternative education providers cannot meet the demand for their services and have reported having to put young people on waiting lists.

**What Alternative Education Provision exists:** There is no published definition of what alternative education is and or a national mapping of what alternative or out of school education provision currently exists. There are a range of different approaches and providers both statutory and voluntary working in this area, however there is clear gap in provision for those under the age of 15:

**Youthreach:** Youthreach is a two-year education, training and work experience programme for early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are unemployed and between 15 and 20 years of age.<sup>xxiv</sup> There are almost 6,000 places available nationally on Youthreach programmes. Over half of these places are provided by the Education Training Boards which run over 100 Youthreach centres. The majority of the remainder of places are provided by FÁS in Community Training Centres. Youthreach centres managed by the Education Training Boards, are designated as 'centres of education' under the Education Act 1998 and are subject to whole centre evaluations by the Department of Education's Inspectorate.<sup>xxv</sup>

Youthreach allows students to gain an academic certification. These can include QQI certifications, Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes, and Leaving Cert Applied programmes. Courses usually run for two years and are full-time, although there may be an option of a part-time course depending on the circumstances.<sup>xxvi</sup> Youthreach is co-funded by the Irish Government, the European Social Fund (ESF), and the Youth Employment Initiative as part of the ESF Programme for Employability Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020.<sup>xxvii</sup>

**Community Training Centres (CTC):** Community Training Centres are a part of Youthreach. They provide a range of training and other supports that help young people find the job of their choice. There are 32 CTCs located around the country operating outside of the schooling system. CTCs are independent community-based organisations which look after the training and employment needs of early school leavers, primarily aged between 16 and 21.<sup>xxviii</sup>

**Youth Encounter Projects:** Youth Encounter Projects (YEP) provide non-residential educational facilities for children who have either become involved in less serious youth crime, or are at risk of becoming involved. A student may be referred to one of these schools by a number of agencies or by the court system. YEPs provide these children with a lower pupil-teacher ratio and a personalised education plan.<sup>xxix</sup>

**Cork Life Centre:** Cork Life Centre is a voluntary organization offering an alternative learning environment to marginalized young people. The Centre and its staff offer students 1:1 tuition in Junior and Leaving Cert subjects and support them in their preparation for these State Exams. The approach to education is a holistic one. Value is placed on the social education of young people as much as on the academic. The Cork Life Centre is an educational service catering for children between the ages of 12-18 years who for various reasons have not thrived or coped in a mainstream educational setting. The Centre is not officially recognized as an alternative educational setting by the government.

**Turas Centre:** The Turas Centre is an alternative education setting in Galway which provides programmes for young people aged 12 to 15 whose mainstream school placement has broken down or who find themselves out of school as a result of disengagement, expulsion, school refusal or other circumstances.<sup>xxx</sup> The centre identifies four student outcomes which indicate success. These include pathways and qualifications, engagement, social skills, and student agency.<sup>xxxi</sup> The evaluation of the Centre found that it has a high impact for the young people who are enrolled and is effective in enabling them to continue their education.<sup>xxxii</sup> Parents and other stakeholders were of the opinion that, if it were not for the Turas Centre, the young people in question would likely have remained out of education and the students themselves unanimously agreed that their experience in the Centre was positive.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

**iScoil Report:** iScoil provides an online learning service for disengaged young people, offering an alternative pathway back to education, learning and qualifications. They offer a tailored programme and deal with a small number of students at any given time.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In an evaluation report of the programme it was found that all had a difficult experience with the education system. However, during their time in iScoil, almost all students attended for almost all scheduled days and almost half had obtained their Certificate in General Learning within a single school year.<sup>xxxv</sup>

**The Right to Education:** The Irish Constitution enshrines the right to free primary education.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The Education Welfare Act 2000 (as amended) provides for compulsory second level education to age 16.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The right to education is also supported by the First Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which Ireland ratified in 1992, every child has a right to education and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is clear that the overall objective of this right is to maximise the child's ability and opportunity to participate fully in their society.<sup>xxxix</sup> Article 28 of the UNCRC provides that States should:

[...] encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need.<sup>xl</sup>

Article 29 of the UNCRC clarifies that the right to education encompasses more than academic achievement and sets out a number of aims including the 'development of the child's personality,

talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential'.<sup>xli</sup> The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has provided guidance to address early school leaving stating that 'to develop the fullest potential of adolescents, consideration must be given to the design of learning environments which capitalise on their capacity for learning, motivation to work with peers, and focus on experiential learning, exploration and limit testing'.<sup>xlii</sup>

The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted in 2015 by 150 countries, setting a 15-year plan to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The education goal, SDG 4, aims 'to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

**Policy Context:** In March 2018, the Department of Education launched a welcome review on current and future provision of Out of School Education. The Review is intended to 'identify the needs of the cohort of children who have disengaged with the mainstream education system or are at risk of doing so'.<sup>xliii</sup> It provides an opportunity to consider the availability of alternative forms of education provision for young people who leave school without a qualification and to provide financial support to them and ensure they are seen as a vital pathway of second level education. However, the results of this review have not yet been published.

### Solutions:

The State should consider how to grow and expand upon and fund out-of-school education provision to ensure a child-centred approach to education by providing alternatives best suited to the individual child. It is recommended that the State:

- Publish a mapping of what alternative and out of school education provision currently exists across the country and examine the drivers for children leaving the education system.
- Develop a national policy and approach to providing out of school provision for young people who fall out of mainstream education. The goal of the policy should be to work towards supporting young people to return to mainstream education or provide alternative pathways for learning and accreditation.
- Introduce local plans for the provision of education.
- Establish a registration system with the Department of Education for Alternative Education Providers to be recognised as centres of education.
- Consider extending the State Inspectorate to Alternative Education centres.
- Provide formal funding for Alternative Education centres.
- Consider how providers could be measured on the basis of outcomes achieved while also maintain flexibility of approach.

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i Department of Education, Retention Rates of pupils in second level schools, entry cohort 2014 (Department of Education, 2021) <<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/retention/?referrer=http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/retention/>> accessed 12 November 2021, 1.

ii Note: There are a number of young people, not quantified, that are on school registers but are in fact out of mainstream education. Young people accessing the Home Tuition Scheme are kept on school registers, young people who attend alternative settings can be kept on school registers as they need to be registered somewhere. And there are an unknown number of young people on reduced timetables within the school system (sometimes as little as 1.5-2 hours per day).

iii Department of Education, Retention Rates of pupils in second level schools, entry cohort 2014 (Department of Education, 2021) <<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/retention/?referrer=http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/retention/>> accessed 12 November 2021, 2.

iv Joint Committee on Education and Skills, *Report on Education inequality and disadvantage and barriers to education* <[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint\\_committee\\_on\\_education\\_and\\_skills/reports/2019/2019-06-05\\_report-on-education-inequality-disadvantage-and-barriers-to-education\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/reports/2019/2019-06-05_report-on-education-inequality-disadvantage-and-barriers-to-education_en.pdf)> accessed 12 November 2021.

v Emer Smyth, Joanne Banks, Jessica O'Sullivan, Selina Mccoy, Paul Redmond and Seamus McGuinness "Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme" (2019) Research Series Number 82.

vi *ibid.*

viii T Kovačič, et al Identifying Innovative Models for Supporting Vulnerable Learners achieve Educational Progression; Early findings from an Evaluation of Social Innovation Fund Ireland's Education Fund (UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre NUIG 2019) 59.

ix *ibid.*

x *ibid* 59, 105-106.

xi *ibid.*

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xii *ibid.*

xiii Section 14, Education Welfare Act 2000 amended by the Child and Family Agency Act 2013.

xiv Youth Encounter Projects (YEPs) provide non-residential educational facilities for children who have either become involved in minor delinquency, or are at risk of becoming involved. A pupil may be referred to one of these schools by a number of agencies or by the court system. Youth Encounter Projects provide these children with a lower pupil teacher ratio and a personalised education plan. Department of Education, High Support Special Schools, Youth Encounter Projects (YEP) and Children Detention Schools <<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/743aab-high-support-special-schools-youth-encounter-projects-yep-and-childr/>> accessed 12 November 2021.

The Youthreach programme provides two years integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age. Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Youthreach <<https://www.gov.ie/en/service/5666e9-youthreach/>> accessed 12 November 2021.

xv T Kovačič, C Forkan, P Dolan, L Rodriguez, *Enabling An Inclusive And Equitable Quality Education For All, Through The Implementation Of A New, Evidence-Based Model On Educational Progression And Transformation, Findings From An Evaluation Of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund June, 2021* (UNESCO NUIG 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3wDL53v>> accessed 12 November 2021, 2.

xvi *ibid.* 4.

xvii 'The Cork Life Centre provides alternative education for young people between the ages of 12 and 18 years who for various reasons have not thrived or coped in mainstream education. The Centre provides individual tuition to students in Junior and Leaving Certificate subjects and prepares them for the State Examinations.' T Kovačič, C Forkan, P Dolan, L Rodriguez, *Enabling An Inclusive And Equitable Quality Education For All, Through The Implementation Of A New, Evidence-Based Model On Educational Progression And Transformation, Findings From An Evaluation Of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund June, 2021* (UNESCO NUIG 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3wDL53v>> accessed 12 November 2021, 83.

xviii 'iScoil is an alternative online community which provides accredited education to young people between 13 and 16 years of age who have been out of mainstream education for six months or more. It is a last-chance resort for learners of this age. Students who face several vulnerabilities and who for various reasons cannot attend mainstream schools are referred to iScoil by Tusla.' T Kovačič, C Forkan, P Dolan, L Rodriguez, *Enabling An Inclusive And Equitable Quality Education For All, Through The Implementation Of A New, Evidence-Based Model On Educational Progression And Transformation, Findings From An Evaluation Of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund June, 2021* (UNESCO NUIG 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3wDL53v>> accessed 12 November 2021, 83.

xix T Kovačič, C Forkan, P Dolan, L Rodriguez, *Enabling An Inclusive And Equitable Quality Education For All, Through The Implementation Of A New, Evidence-Based Model On Educational Progression And Transformation, Findings From An Evaluation Of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund June, 2021* (UNESCO NUIG 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3wDL53v>> accessed 12 November 2021, 84.

xx Lynch S. "From exclusion to inclusion: Defining alternative education in Ireland" 4.

xxi *ibid.* 5.

xxii Under Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, Tusla is responsible for maintaining a register of all children who are home educated/schooled or who attend a non-recognised / independent school. Tusla defines an Independent School as a school that is not overseen by the Department of Education and Skills. For more see Tusla, Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service <<https://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/alternative-education-assessment-and-registration-service/>> accessed 12 November 2021.

xxiii The function of the AERS is to make assessment of the educational provision for children against ministerial guidance, in order to determine if a child can be placed on the statutory register of children educated outside of a recognised school. For more see Tusla, Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service <<https://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/alternative-education-assessment-and-registration-service/>> accessed 12 November 2021.

xxiv Government of Ireland 'Youthreach' <<https://www.gov.ie/en/service/5666e9-youthreach/>> accessed 15 February 2022.

xxv *ibid.*

xxvi Spunout 'Is Youthreach for you?' <<https://bit.ly/3prYGb8>> accessed 1 December 2021.

xxvii Dublin & Dun Laoghaire ETB, Youthreach, <https://www.ddletb.ie/youth/youthreach/> accessed 2 December 2021.

xxviii Irish Association of Community training Organisations <<http://www.iacto.ie/learners/ctcs/>> accessed 15 February 2022.

xxix <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/743aab-high-support-special-schools-youth-encounter-projects-yep-and-childr/>

xxx Murray C. "Evaluation of the Turas Alternative Education Pilot Programme" (2021) 9.

xxxi *ibid.* 10.

xxxii *ibid.*

xxxiii *ibid.*

xxxiv Eivers E. "The efficacy of iScoil's home-based provision" (2021) 2.

xxxv *ibid.* 76.

xxxvi Constitution of Ireland, Article 42.

xxxvii Education Welfare Act 2000, s.17 provides that the parent of a child shall cause the child concerned to attend a recognised school on each school day. Section 17(2) sets out a number of exceptions. A child is defined as a person resident in the State who has reached the age of six years and who – (a) has not reached the age of 16 years, or (b) has not completed three years of post-primary education.

xxxviii First Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights, Art 2.

xxxix UNCRC General Comment No. 1 on Article 29(1) the Aims of Education (2001) CRC/GC/2001/1 para 12.

xl UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 28.

xli *ibid.*, Art 29(1)(a).

xlii UNCRC 'General Comment No. 20 on the Rights of the Child During Adolescence' (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/20 para 77.

xliii Department of Education and Skills, 'Minister Bruton announces consultation on Out of School Education Provision' (15 March 2018) <<https://bit.ly/2pwDnGd>> accessed 15 February 2022.