



Submission to  
The Joint Committee on Education and Skills

*On Home School Liaison Scheme*

On behalf of the INTO

November 2017

## **Home School Liaison Scheme**

The INTO engages regularly with its members with a view to informing INTO policy. The following INTO submission on the topic of the Home School Liaison Scheme has been informed by consultations with teachers and specifically by regular meetings with HSCL representatives.

### **Background**

The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme was initiated as a pilot project in 1990 to promote partnership between parents and teachers with the purpose of enhancing pupils' learning opportunities and to promote their retention in the education system. The HSCL Scheme was further extended in 2005 under DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), the Action Plan for educational inclusion. Central to the success of the DEIS Action Plan is the commitment to building relationships between the home and the school to better support children at risk. The INTO acknowledges the significant role that the HSCL scheme has played in helping to tackle educational disadvantage and, in particular, the commitment to the scheme and the visionary approach under the direction of the pioneering national co-ordinator, the late Concepta Conaty R.I.P. However, the HSCL scheme has been seriously impacted in recent years as a consequence of recessionary cutbacks. The INTO is hopeful that the Educational Welfare Board (EWS) within Tusla will offer a renewed commitment to safeguarding and progressing the HSCL scheme.

### **Rural HSCL**

Initially, all DEIS primary schools, both urban and rural, were included in the HSCL Scheme, however, it is regrettable that since the abolition of the rural co-ordinators no progress has been made in filling the gap left behind in the system. Rural DEIS schools have specific needs and would benefit from improved home-school links. In general, the INTO is of the view that there is a role for HSCL support to build home-school relations in all primary schools. At the very least the HSCL scheme should be reassigned to all schools recognised as having educational disadvantage status, and consideration should be given to extending the scheme to special schools who have particular needs in terms of home school relations.

### **Supporting Travellers**

The attendance, participation and retention of Traveller pupils continues to be of concern in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools. The HSCL teacher does not currently have the capacity to fulfil the duties previously held by the Visiting Teacher for Travellers (VTT). The VTT had a specific understanding of Traveller culture that has been noticeably lost to the system. The level of engagement required to support Travellers needs intervention beyond that which can be incorporated into the current remit of the HSCL role. In an attempt to counteract the loss of resources to Travellers, the INTO proposes that consideration should be given to expanding the allocation of HSCL teachers in areas that have a high concentration of Traveller pupils, including non-DEIS schools. Extending the capacity of HSCL to support Traveller pupils and their families would require specific professional development opportunities for HSCL teachers that would enhance their understanding of Traveller culture and their specific barriers to education. An

expansion of the HSCL service could only complement support for Traveller families from other education welfare services.

### **The Five-Year Limit**

The DES has introduced a five-year limit on the deployment of teachers to the role of HSCL and this five-year term was restated in the *DEIS Action Plan 2017*. While there is a rationale to introduce a limit, for example, to enable more teachers the opportunity to take up the role, the INTO suggests more flexibility at local level. The principal may be best placed to determine the most appropriate teacher for the role of HSCL considering that the responsibility of staff deployment is the function of the school principal as set out in Section 23 of the *Education Acts 1998-2012*. A balance must be achieved to ensure that the five-year limit does not result in schools losing experienced teachers, who have invested time in establishing strong relationships with families, from the role. Therefore, the INTO is of the view that schools should be granted the autonomy and flexibility at local level to deploy the best placed teacher to the role of HSCL rather than be confined by a five-year limit .

### **Home Visits**

Home visitation is an integral part of the HSCL Scheme's focus on partnership. In many cases it promotes co-operation between the school and the home, and maximises the child's involvement and their retention in the education system. However, the nature of HSCL home visits has evolved in recent years and HSCL teachers sometimes find it problematic fulfilling the requirement for home visits. In some cases, parents are more amenable to school visits as opposed to home visits. Some parents are reluctant to accommodate HSCL visits in the home as the practice does not align with their culture. The INTO acknowledges the importance of home visits in ensuring a holistic perspective, however, interactions with parents should be about the contact irrespective of the context. Schools and HSCL teachers need to be trusted with the flexibility and discretion to determine locally whether home or school interactions are most appropriate at any given time.

### **HSCL CPD**

The lack of commitment to date to a system-wide, professional development programme is an ongoing concern for HSCL teachers. The preventative role of the HSCL encompasses a broad remit including courses/classes, transfer programmes, integration with community groups, policy formation at school level, literacy/numeracy development and staff development to name but a few. Therefore, the HSCL teachers need ongoing professional development opportunities in order to extend and enhance their very specific role. There is some ambiguity around the role of the HSCL. Regular, ongoing access to professional development would help restate and clarify that role particularly within the context of the Education Welfare Service (EWS). Since the recessionary cutbacks, professional development opportunities have been minimal. Professional induction support is also required for newly appointed HSCLs as there is increasing turnover due to the five-year limit. Adequate induction is important to ensure consistency, experience and expertise is harnessed. With a view to ensuring a co-ordinated, inter-agency approach, the INTO also recommends that professional development should be provided to all teams within the EWS – the HSCL teachers, School Completion Programme (SCP) personnel and Education Welfare Officers (EWO), in addition to providing HSCL specific professional development. The INTO is supportive of an integrated approach to supporting families but where the different roles and

responsibilities are respected. It may be at times appropriate for the various teams to work together, however, it is important that the HSCL teacher is not expected to undertake the role of social worker or any other professional.

The INTO acknowledges and welcomes the recent commitment by the Educational Welfare Service to a comprehensive CPD programme that is currently underway.

### **Meitheal**

The INTO notes development of the *Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS)* Programme and the *Meitheal* practice model. While the INTO supports the commitment to professional development, it is important to state that HSCL teachers are not social workers or welfare officers, and they do not want to take on roles for which they are not qualified. Participation of HSCL teachers in *Meitheal* should not be obligatory. However, there may be times when it is appropriate for HSCL teachers to become involved with *Meitheal* where it is of benefit to the child. In such cases they should have the opportunity to do so with the relevant supports in place. Any involvement by HSCL teachers or class teachers in *Meitheal* should be supported with substitution cover and other practical supports as required. Moreover, any involvement in *Meitheal* or similar programmes should not involve excessive paperwork for teachers and schools.

### **Conclusion**

The INTO is strongly of the view that the role of the HSCL teacher in building lasting relationships between the home and the school is essential in tackling educational disadvantage. Parental involvement, especially in areas at risk of social exclusion, does not just benefit the children and the school - it is a crucial aspect of lifelong learning (OECD, 1997). The HSCL must be supported with regular professional development to allow them to continue to work to enhance the capacity of families to support their children in pursuing improved educational attainment.