

Response of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)

To

Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning.

January 2013

INTO welcomes the opportunity to respond to the focused consultation on *Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning*.

INTO made a comprehensive submission to the earlier consultation *Early Years (0-6) Strategy* and wishes to reaffirm the Organisation's support for the Department of Education's previously stated vision for Early Years provision, which is to give every child the best start possible to achieving his/her full potential. In its earlier consultation, DE acknowledged that the best quality research demonstrates conclusively that teacher-led provision of Early Years education results in the highest quality outcomes for children. INTO would go further and demand that, in order to secure the best outcomes, early years provision should not only be teacher-led but should be teacher- delivered.

INTO welcomes the Education Minister's statement to the NI Assembly in December 2012, that failure to deliver anything less than the highest quality early years educational experience short-changes these children.

INTO welcomes the proposal to extend the Foundation Stage curriculum to include a non-compulsory pre-school year. The Minister has stated, in his December 2012 statement, that the thorough inspection process will be extended and that the principles of *Every School a Good School* will be applied to all DE funded early years provision. The logical consequence of this policy would be to ensure that the provision is delivered by qualified teachers. As well as guaranteeing the highest educational outcomes, this would provide for continuity and consistency of standards across the extended Foundation Stage.

INTO acknowledges that it would take a period of time for many workers who are not qualified teachers and who are currently employed in the delivery of the pre-school year to gain qualified teacher status and accepts that a period of time, say five years, should be set aside to allow such workers to be upskilled.

INTO notes the Minister's stated intention to 'refocus the use of extended schools funding to nursery schools and nursery units'. INTO is seeking an assurance that this does not mean that the Minister intends removing existing extended schools funding from primary and

post-primary schools in disadvantaged areas. The Minister needs to clarify what he means by 'refocus'.

INTO notes the Minister's plan to pilot *Early Years Education Support Clusters*, to help raise standards by making greater use of the teaching expertise in nursery schools and units, along with expertise in playgroups, across other relevant providers and early years specialists. INTO fully supports all efforts to raise standards but again would state that DE's own earlier research evidence paper demonstrated clearly that the highest standards will be achieved through teacher-led provision. In the interests of equality, all parents should have the right to choose teacher-led provision for their children.

INTO notes the Minister's plan to introduce 'some flexibility' in overall enrolment numbers up to a maximum class size of 30 in certain circumstances. This requires clarification. In addition to health and safety concerns that this change will provoke INTO is concerned about the impact upon the workload of teachers and the delivery of the curriculum, particularly to those pupils who most need high levels of adult support. INTO would argue that increasing class size is not the way to address under-provision, particularly in the nursery sector.

INTO notes with concern the moratorium on new and additional fulltime places. INTO also does not understand why DE will consider options for standardised patterns of attendance in pre-school, as part of a wider approach to area-based planning. This requires clarification.

INTO notes with concern the Minister's statement that he will consider the extension of the current SEN pilots, which are aimed at building the capacity of school staff to enable them to identify and meet the special and additional educational needs of children in pre-school settings. INTO consider the SEN pilots to be inadequate as they do not address the need for practical support alongside the capacity building strategy. INTO would argue that such children require intensive additional support from trained specialists. Capacity building of pre-school staff is not the answer to addressing the special needs of these, perhaps the most vulnerable children.