

National Early Years Strategy  
Department of Children and Youth Affairs  
43-49 Mespil Road  
Dublin 4  
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**Re: Submission on National Early Years Strategy**

13 January 2017

A Chara,

Thank you for inviting the INTO to participate in the Open Policy Debate on the National Early Years Strategy at the Iveagh House on Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> December. The day provided a great forum for reflection, feedback and discussion from the various stakeholders.

The INTO recognises the integral role that primary school teachers play in the early years' sector in Ireland. Early childhood education developments encompass the infant section of primary schools in addition to providers of services such as crèches, playschools, naíonraí and childminders. Nearly 40% of 4-year-olds and virtually all 5-year-olds attend primary school, where early education is provided in infant classes (DES, 2016). Therefore, primary teachers are central to the debate on early childhood care and education.

A significant milestone in early childhood education was the introduction of the free pre-school year under the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. It has always been the INTO view that pre-schools should be led by educators with graduate level qualifications. The INTO welcomes the extension of the free pre-school year with the addition of a second year from September 2016. However, it is important that the development should not impact negatively on schools.

The tradition of starting school at the age of four has been a strong one in Ireland. Some children, from disadvantaged areas, in particular, may not avail of the second free pre-school

year, and continue to start junior infants at 4 years old with the attraction of the longer day. Without the opportunity to repeat a year in the infant section of primary schools, the gap will widen between those children who avail of a second year of free pre-school and those who may not. These children are most likely to be the most vulnerable children. Therefore, the INTO proposes that the second year of ECCE should be provided as part of the infant cycle in primary schools. This proposal of providing a pre-junior infant year, with a qualified primary teacher for the infant school day, should be piloted initially in schools that have the capacity. Children would benefit from the experience and expertise of a qualified primary teacher for a longer day. The INTO also recommends the continuance and expansion of Early Start, the current pre-school intervention programme supported by the Department of Education.

Young children from poor socio-economic backgrounds are among the most vulnerable in our society and they must be central to any National Early Years Strategy. Similarly, any review of DEIS must consider how all pupils at risk of social exclusion are supported, while recognising the need to commit concentrated resources for those schools at highest need due to intergenerational poverty. Teachers continue to voice real concerns regarding child poverty including the need to more systematically address child hunger in school to ensure children's needs are not falling through the gaps. The adverse impact of the growing problem of homelessness and living in temporary accommodation on children's education and wellbeing must be considered as a matter of priority.

Both pre-schools and primary schools care for and educate children. It is argued that the co-dependent relationship that exists between early education and care should be nurtured and respected (Hayes, 2007). Any National Early Years' Strategy should make provisions to build relationships and ensure the sharing of information between pre-schools and primary schools. The INTO welcomes the development of research on the transitional phase from preschool to primary school with a view to developing supports for transitions that will provide improved communication and transparency and ultimately enhance the experience for children, parents and educators (NCCA, 2016). However, any expectation for schools and/or teachers to engage with transitional arrangements must be accompanied with the provision of appropriate resourcing, space and time.

Particular attention must be given to the transitional process for children with special educational needs (SEN) to ensure a smooth transition. The INTO anticipates that the Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) will be responsive to the needs of each individual child in the context of their pre-school setting. Every effort should be made to ensure early detection and intervention for children with SEN. Crucial time is lost if intervention is left until the beginning of junior infants.

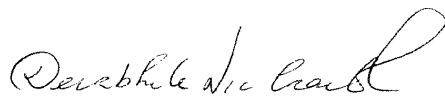
The appointment of pre-school education inspectors, who work closely with the Primary Inspectorate ensuring continuity and consistency with a view to improving and enhancing educational standards within the pre-school sector, is a welcome development.

The INTO continues to campaign to enhance provision for the four to six year olds by demanding classes not greater than 20, childcare assistants in every infant classroom and adequate resources to implement the child-centred play-based curriculum in the infant classes. The Programme for Government commits to reducing “the pupil-teacher ratio for junior and senior infants by providing smaller classes, which have the greatest beneficial impact on younger pupils” (2016, p.88). However, Budget 2017 failed to match the ambition with the resources.

*Aistear* has been welcomed and commended by teachers for providing a framework for continuity of learning for children from birth to six years of age. However, engagement has been on a voluntary basis due to the lack of state funding. Furthermore, the absence of a fully resourced implementation plan, on a national basis, has resulted in many challenges for schools and teachers. The INTO anticipates that the associated issues will be addressed in the NCCA review of the curriculum structure and organisation. However, any revised curriculum for the infant classes must be accompanied by a comprehensive professional development programme and resourcing.

The INTO look forward to engaging in any further consultations or discussions in relation to the development of the National Early Years Strategy.

Le gach dea ghúí,



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**Deirbhile Nic Craith**  
**Director of Education and Research**