

INTO Submission

Department of Children Disability and Equality Statement of Strategy

2025-2027

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Submission on behalf of the INTO

**Department of Children, Disability and
Equality**

**On their Strategy Statement
2025-2027**



Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation represents over 50,000 teachers across the island of Ireland. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Department of Children, Disability, and Equality's (DCDE) consultation on their Strategy Statement 2025-2027.

At the outset, the INTO acknowledges the comprehensive nature of the Department's Statement of Strategy 2023-2025 and its ambitions to fostering a fair, inclusive society where all children and young people can achieve their potential. However, it is clear, as we look back, that many of the objectives outlined in the 2023-2025 strategy remain unmet.

This submission outlines that urgent action is needed in areas such as access to therapeutic and mental health supports, the persistent impact of poverty, housing insecurity and disadvantage, inadequate transition planning for children, and the continued marginalisation of Traveller, Roma and migrant children.

Our submission also draws attention to three growing areas of concern; teacher wellbeing, the digital environment in which children increasingly learn and interact, and the rise of far-right rhetoric. Schools are now being asked to navigate these areas, often without the necessary supports or guidance.

The INTO is also acutely aware of the commitments laid out in the Programme for Government, in particular, the target of reducing class sizes to 19 to 1, the ambition to deliver a DEIS+ scheme for our most disadvantaged pupils, the planned expansion of special schools and special classes, and the bespoke supports for 1,300 small schools. We strongly believe that the DCDE Strategy Statement 2025–2027 must, with urgency, form part of a whole-of-government effort to implement these commitments. We urge the Department to ensure that its Strategy Statement 2025-2027 reflects the real needs of children, families and schools, and that it takes a whole-of-government approach to children's rights and wellbeing. The DCDE must support this strategy with inclusive and fully resourced actions coordinated across departments managing education, health and housing. Swift action here will lead to a better, fairer education system for all.

Supports for Children with Additional Educational Needs

Despite recent policy developments and the significant work being done by the NCSE and the special education section of the Department of Education and Youth (DEY), this country's education system continues to fall short in delivering the level of support needed by pupils with disabilities and special educational needs. Commitments around supporting inclusive and special education have not been matched with sufficient action, or material and human resources. As a result, many children remain underserved by our underachieving education support systems.

Schools have become the de facto providers of emotional and behavioural care for children with additional needs outside of their families, while lacking the essential therapeutic supports to support these pupils effectively. It is within this context, that the INTO calls for DCDE to work more closely with DEY and the Department of Health to address this urgent need for therapeutic supports and ensure that children's rights to education and wellbeing are met.

The INTO's 2025 Special Education Policy notes that thousands of children remain on waiting lists for vital services, including speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, psychology, and physiotherapy. This results in a deeply inequitable system. Families with the means to do so turn to private services, while those who cannot afford to 'go private' must wait for months or even years, as their children's needs continue to worsen or become more complex. In the most serious cases, we see families being forced to resort to litigation to secure access to what should be guaranteed supports. The INTO views this as a failure of the State to uphold its legal and ethical responsibilities to children with additional needs.



Some progress has been made in recent years. In response to consistent INTO advocacy, DEY and the NCSE launched the Educational Therapy Support Service in 2024. The INTO welcomes this initiative as a positive step, however, the current scale of provision remains wholly inadequate. As of March 2025, only 39 professionals have been allocated to support schools through the scheme. Recognising the Government's recently announced move towards establishing a National Therapy Service, the INTO strongly urges that future allocations provide sufficient numbers of therapists to meet the needs of all pupils and school communities across the country.

The INTO also wishes to draw attention to the continuing challenges children have accessing appropriate mental health supports. Families for Reform of CAMHS have described the current service as “largely non-existent”, with over 4,400 children waiting for a first appointment and serious gaps in the provision of mental health services for children. The underfunding of mental health services has left many children without the necessary tools to support their wellbeing and, by extension, engagement with their education.

In 2023 the INTO welcomed the DEY's in-school counselling pilot, representing a hard-won step forward following sustained campaigning by the INTO. However, while these pilot schemes are still welcome, they must be viewed as a starting point. The INTO calls for the nationwide rollout of in-school counselling services, to ensure that all children have access to timely mental health supports when needed.

Teacher Conditions

Supporting all students is only sustainable when teachers themselves feel adequately supported. The INTO believes that DCDE's Strategy Statement 2025–2027 must recognise the link between teacher wellbeing and pupil wellbeing and must commit to improving conditions that could undermine this relationship.

Teachers across the country continue to report rising workloads, limited time, and the lack of resources and professional development needed to deliver inclusive education. These pressures are especially acute in DEIS schools and in special schools that support children with complex needs. Without immediate action to improve teachers' working conditions, schools cannot be expected to meet the goals of inclusion and educational equity.

A core priority must be the provision of statutory entitlements that reflect the realities of modern family life. Teachers must have access to appropriate reproductive health leave, including leave for early pregnancy loss and fertility treatment, as well as surrogacy leave, in line with the recommendations of the PLACES Report and INTO Congress resolutions. The INTO calls on government to fast track the Reproductive Health Related Leave Bill to bring fairness into the workplace for all workers.

Mental health supports for teachers must also be strengthened. Teaching is emotional work, and there is an urgent need for accessible counselling services, peer supports, and whole-school policies that cater to teacher wellbeing. With this, the restoration of substitute cover for all teacher absences will ensure that teachers can take necessary leave without impacting pupils' learning.

Teachers determine a child's experience in school. When teachers are supported, respected, and given the conditions they need, children benefit. DCDE's Strategy Statement must reflect this understanding, and commit to a system-wide, cross-departmental approach to educational care that begins with the wellbeing of the teachers who deliver it.



Strengthening Transitions from Early Years to Primary Education

A child's transition from early years education to primary school is an important moment in their education journey. It represents major change for a child in their education setting, relationships, expectations, routines, and support systems. The INTO strongly believes that strengthening this transition phase must be a central component of DCDE's 2025–2027 Strategy.

The *Children's School Lives* (CSL) Report No. 4 notes that for many children, the move into junior infants is positive. However, it also identifies a number of gaps in the current system that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable children, those with additional needs, from marginalised communities, or those without strong home supports.

The CSL report reinforces what is well understood by teachers and early year educators, that transitions are not isolated moments, but ongoing processes that unfold over time and require consistent adult support. Children face a host of changes which can trigger stress, anxiety, and behavioural challenges, especially for children who have benefited from individualised supports in early years settings. Any supports for this transition must consider improving relationship-building between educators in early years and teachers in primary, and the streamlining of sharing of information between the settings. CSL data currently shows that in practice, these relationships remain the exception, not the norm. Only 26% of primary teachers reported regularly receiving reports or information from early years settings about incoming pupils.

AIM supports, which provide additional supports to children in early years settings abruptly cease when children transition to junior infants. There is no guarantee that similar supports will be in place, even when a child has documented needs. This lack of continuity directly impacts the developmental progress made in early years settings and puts primary schools on the backfoot as they begin to introduce these new pupils to primary education. If these supports do not transition with the child opportunities for early intervention will continue to be missed.

This lack of coordination is not a reflection on the commitment of teachers or early years educators, but rather on a structural failure to resource cross-sector collaboration. The fragmentation between early years and primary education provision is a systems issue. Early years services are overseen by the DCDE, while primary schools fall under the remit of the DEY. This departmental division creates a disconnect at one of the most important points in a child's educational journey.

For children to experience continuous support, both Departments must commit to processes that span this transition. This should include shared guidelines on the transfer of information, shared training for early years educators and primary teachers on supporting transitions and child development, and continued access to supports for children as they move from early years to junior infants, including the extension of AIM supports into primary education.

As the CSL report makes clear, poorly managed transitions risk deepening educational inequalities and placing additional strain on both pupils and teachers, while well-supported transitions can improve attendance, emotional wellbeing, and learning outcomes.

Child Poverty, Homelessness and Disadvantage

Childhood poverty, homelessness and disadvantage continues to be a major issue facing Ireland today. Research from the Children's Rights Alliance highlights how children in homelessness are more likely to experience developmental delays, anxiety, depression, and isolation. Their school performance is impacted due to frequent moves, disrupted routines, and lack of a stable home environment. According to the *Children's School Lives Study Report 4*, school transitions and early educational experiences can be more difficult for children living in poverty, increasing their risk of disadvantage as they move through the system.



The 2024 *Survey on Income and Living Conditions*, published by the CSO, found that 26.7% of children under the age of 16 in Ireland were at risk of poverty. Children living in poverty are less likely to access early years education, extracurricular activities, or timely health interventions. These disadvantages often begin in infancy and deepen over time. Schools are doing their best to meet these pupils needs, stretching limited funding to provide breakfast clubs, hygiene supplies, or uniforms. However, the scale of child poverty far exceeds what any school can address alone.

It is the view of the INTO that the State's fragmented response, split between the departments of Housing, Education and Youth, and Children, Disability and Equality is slowing meaningful progress. The DCDE must play a stronger role in coordinating a whole-of-government response to end child poverty, homelessness and disadvantage. Ireland has a legal obligation under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to uphold the rights of every child to have "a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development."

The DCDE's 2025–2027 Strategy must also include targeted, cross-departmental measures to support children growing up in communities of highest disadvantage. Government actions related to child disadvantage must prioritise the establishment of a DEIS Plus scheme, as proposed in the INTO's 30 for 30 manifesto. The scheme would see enhanced funding and wraparound supports being provided to the 100 schools serving those communities of highest deprivation. Enhanced supports, delivered through schools in these communities, have the potential to have a lasting impact if properly resourced.

Delivering on promises of sabbaticals for teachers in DEIS schools is also key to tackling educational inequality and supporting teacher wellbeing, as it improves teacher retention in schools struggling to attract and retain staff.

The INTO calls for the extension of the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme to all schools with evidenced levels of disadvantage, regardless of DEIS designation. This programme, implemented by qualified teachers, has a proven record of strengthening relationships between schools and families and plays a major role in improving attendance, engagement, and outcomes for our most vulnerable pupils. Engagement between schools, parents and the community is extremely important, and the provision of HSCL teachers should be scaled to support engagement across schools nationally.

Childhood homelessness, poverty and disadvantage is a product of policy choices. The INTO wish to make clear that no strategy for children can be effective unless the government confronts the root causes of poverty and disadvantage. Schools will continue to support our most vulnerable children, but they cannot, and should not, be expected to financially compensate for structural failures in housing, health and income supports. The Department's 2025–2027 Strategy must set out a clear vision for ending child homelessness and lifting children out of poverty and disadvantage.

The Digital Landscape

The digital world is where today's children learn, play, and grow. The INTO believes that it is the State's duty to ensure that the digital world is safe, inclusive, and supportive for children accessing it. As this section outlines, Irish children remain unprotected online. The INTO urges the Department to take decisive action in its strategy statement to safeguard the digital well-being of all children.

While digital technologies can offer huge benefits, they also present increasingly complex risks to children's well-being, particularly in terms of mental health, privacy, and exposure to harm. As noted in the OECD's 2025 report *How's Life for Children in the Digital Age?*, nearly all 15-year-olds in OECD countries have access to a smartphone, laptop or tablet with an internet connection, and more than half spend over 30 hours per week online. In Ireland, CyberSafeKids' 2024 report *Left To Their Own Devices* confirms that 94% of children aged 8–12 own a smart device. These reports show how deeply embedded digital technologies have become in children's lives and how important it is to ensure that digital environments are safe, and supportive spaces for children.



Despite this high level of usage, protection systems remain inadequate. Both the OECD and CyberSafeKids highlight a serious lack of oversight, regulation, and consistent digital education. The CyberSafeKids report notes that one in four children in Ireland aged 8–12 reported experiencing cyberbullying, with girls disproportionately affected. Worryingly, the report also indicated that many of these children did not report their experiences or did not know how to respond.

The impact of the digital world is increasingly felt within schools. Nearly half of teachers surveyed by CyberSafeKids reported dealing with multiple online incidents in a single academic year, with problems often stemming from activities taking place outside of school hours. Schools are being asked to manage the fallout of online incidents, including cyberbullying, inappropriate content sharing, and reputational damage, without sufficient system supports or resources.

It is also clear that simply banning devices, as has been suggested in public discussions, is not practical nor pedagogically sound. The OECD report cautions that digital bans may restrict access to learning opportunities and does little to equip children with the skills needed to navigate digital spaces safely. Instead, it recommends that education systems need to embed digital literacy and safeguarding education into the curriculum.

The INTO believes that focusing solely on schools to provide this support is narrow-sighted and recommends that the Strategy Statement 2025–2027 adopt a cross-departmental, whole-of-system approach to child digital well-being, recognising the shared responsibility of the family home, the wider community, and the school. Only through this shared approach can we ensure that children are adequately supported to navigate the digital world safely.

Supporting Children from Migrant, Roma and Traveller Backgrounds

Ireland's diverse population is reflected in our classrooms with a wide range of languages, cultures, and life experiences represented. This diversity enriches our school communities, but it also presents challenges that require thoughtful, well-resourced, and inclusive responses.

According to the CSL Report No. 8c, more than one in five children attending Irish primary schools has an immigrant background with 30% of children speaking a language other than English or Irish at home.

While many children from migrant backgrounds reported enjoying school and holding high academic aspirations, they often experience barriers to belonging and inclusion. First-generation children are more likely to experience anxiety, worry, and isolation, particularly in primary school. Language acquisition and unfamiliarity with the Irish school system can make this transition especially difficult.

Despite strong academic self-concept reported by many of these children, they are more likely to be placed in lower ability groups, particularly for reading. Teachers in the CSL study noted the difficulties in supporting EAL learners due to a lack of targeted, flexible supports that adapt to their pupils emerging needs.

Roma children face many of the same challenges as other migrant children but are often doubly disadvantaged due to poverty, discrimination, and language barriers. The *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030* notes that only 64.7% of Roma children entered junior infants from an early years setting in 2022/2023, compared with 92.3% of the general population. It was also noted that Roma children often experience racism or language-based exclusion and face persistent challenges in accessing early education and wraparound supports.

Traveller children remain one of the most marginalised groups in the Irish education system. The CSL reports that academic self-concept among Traveller children declines over time. In early primary years,



many Traveller pupils express high confidence in their schoolwork, but by 6th class, they are the most likely of all ethnic groups to believe they are “no good” at school. Traveller children are disproportionately placed in the lowest ability groupings in both literacy and maths by the senior end of primary school. Outcomes for Traveller children across all education levels remain significantly below national averages.

The *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030* offers a strong framework for improvement, outlining goals to improve access to early learning and care, strengthen transitions between education stages, and expand targeted supports such as the STAR pilot programme. The strategy also commits to cross-departmental cooperation, an oversight group with community representation, and a focus on culturally responsive pedagogy. The INTO insists the implementation of the strategy be robust, consistent and well supported with investment in community education, culturally relevant teaching materials, and anti-racism training.

Responding to Far-Right Rhetoric

The INTO recognises that Ireland’s schools and teachers play a vital role in shaping the narrative of a fair and inclusive society. They model respect, equality, and care, providing safe and nurturing environments where all children are welcomed, regardless of their background, identity, or beliefs. However, because of this role, our schools are increasingly being targeted by extremist ideologies. The rise of far-right, anti-equality rhetoric is not only a societal threat but is increasingly becoming an educational one. Its impact is being reported to us more and more by members across the country.

As outlined in the Hope and Courage Collective’s report *Greater Than Fear*, far-right actors have deliberately targeted schools and youth spaces as battlegrounds in their effort to sow discord and reverse progress on inclusion. While often stating their intention is protecting children, these campaigns undermine children’s rights and well-being by spreading hateful narratives, vilifying minorities, and weaponising misinformation. Recently we have seen moves to derail inclusive sex education and spread disinformation about asylum seekers and LGBTQ+ inclusion.

In light of this, the INTO commends the efforts of the Hope and Courage Collective, whose training and resources have already supported many within the education sector to recognise, resist, and counter organised hate. INTO has engaged directly with this training and strongly recommends that similar sessions be made available to school communities across Ireland. Practical guidance rooted in the community can play a powerful role in helping principals and teachers to respond confidently and calmly when challenged with harmful speech. Where schools and communities are supported to speak openly about inclusion and equality, to share trusted facts, and to name disinformation for what it is, the power of hate diminishes.

Any strategy statement must make clear that hate has no place in Ireland’s schools. Far-right rhetoric must be actively countered through policy, partnership, and education. Teachers must be protected and supported when standing up for equality, democratic processes and inclusive communities. Ireland’s children deserve to learn in environments where respect and inclusion are not only protected but celebrated. As the Hope and Courage Collective reminds us, communities across Ireland are already doing the work of resistance. It is time the system backed them fully.



References

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