



**Submission on the Formulation of a Strategic
Plan for the National Educational Welfare
Board**

from the

Society of St Vincent de Paul

Social Justice and Policy Team

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Introduction

The Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) welcomes this opportunity to contribute our views to the formulation of a new strategic plan for the NEWB. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is the largest voluntary organisation of social concern and action in Ireland. Our 9,500 volunteers and staff provide a range of services for children and families including family visitation, breakfast clubs and after school projects, education grants, crèches and preschools. We regularly see how early school leaving blights children's lives into adulthood. SVP wholeheartedly supports the work of the NEWB and the development of an appropriately resourced national Educational Welfare Service.

Early school leaving is more prevalent among students from lower socio-economic groups (NESF 2002: 33). The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice (2007: 1) also highlights the fact that children living in economically and socially deprived areas do not benefit from the education system to the same extent as their better off counterparts. Children in the most disadvantaged primary and post primary schools miss significantly more school than those in the least disadvantaged schools (NEWB 2006:4) – pointing to the need to target resources at those children who are most at risk of falling through the cracks of our educational system.

The Society acknowledges that bodies such as the NEWB are operating in a difficult environment, where already limited budgets are coming under increasing pressure and strain. However it remains essential to ensure that all children are supported to access education, and that their right to receive an education is upheld through adequate funding of essential services such as those provided by the NEWB.

Capturing the experience of our members

The Social Justice Committee of the SVP has a mechanism for gathering the experience of the membership as it relates to issues of social policy and concern. This is known as the 'From The Ground Up' project team, and it takes samples of the experiences of our conferences throughout the country which then inform our policy positions.

The 'From The Ground Up' Project team recognises and welcomes the role played by the NEWB in supporting schools and families to ensure that every child receives an education. However team members report that too many school days are being missed before action is taken by the Board and that there are too few Educational Welfare Officers to allow for the effective monitoring of absenteeism.

Priorities in the development of a new Strategic Plan

Work and role of the NEWB

The strategic goal of implementing a preventative strategy to address absenteeism will continue to be a relevant and important one which should be carried forward to the next strategic plan. While the NEWB acknowledges the importance of getting to the root of the problems behind non-attendance, **it may be useful for the Board to establish a commitment to identify, investigate and address the reasons for absenteeism among some children.** This could take the form of developing the Board's research capacity or at the very least ensuring that work practices include an investigative element in case management procedures. The experience of SVP suggests that factors which have an impact on rates of absenteeism and retention include income poverty and inadequate financial support for attending school, food poverty and difficulty affording or accessing transport, among other issues.

Targeting and prioritising limited resources

The NEWB must ensure that adequate funding and resources are allocated to allow it to carry out its statutory functions under the Education Welfare Act 2000. *Every Day Counts* (2006) acknowledges the resourcing challenge that is put to Government if the NEWB is to achieve its aims. Given the limited resources available in the context of the development of the new strategic plan, it is essential that children and young people who are most at risk of early school leaving and educational disadvantage and who are likely to experience barriers to accessing support from various other quarters are prioritised by the NEWB.

Developing inter-agency and collaborative working practices

The strategic goal outlined in *Every Day Counts* (2006) of developing inter-agency and collaborative working practices is one which should be carried forward to the Board's new strategic plan, particularly as such a priority is outlined in *Towards 2016* with a view to improving educational outcomes for children. *Towards 2016* (p. 43) commits to the development of protocols **“to ensure co-operation and mutual support among those working to improve attendance and retention in schools”**. In addition to this, the NEWB and Department of Education and Science “will work together to ensure that an integrated approach to children at risk is adopted between educational welfare officers and other staff involved in the implementation of the new School Support Programme”. **In order for this commitment to be met, the form which this integrated approach and co-operation will take must be clearly set out.** It is also important that the new strategic plan links with other policy commitments around educational disadvantage.

Interagency working is essential to addressing the causes of absenteeism and will allow the organisations involved in such work to add value to the services which they provide. **Engaging with, for example the organisers of breakfast clubs, homework clubs and extra curricular activities in schools** may be a useful way for educational welfare officers to identify children at risk of absenteeism, to understand the problems being experienced by these children and their families, and to as develop complementary initiatives to support these families.

An SVP conference providing assistance to students at all stages of the educational system by funding homework clubs, literacy classes for parents and sponsoring children with school and extra curricular costs says:

“We believe that poverty can start at Junior Infants and if we do not assist these children they will be disadvantaged from the word go. If we can keep these children in school, and assist in paying for their outside interests, we know the children will have a good opportunity to find work in the future”.

In addition to this, some community groups which work with schools, young people and families will have an expertise in working with particular groups, for example, migrant

workers, travellers, children living in poverty, refugees or asylum seekers. Interagency and collaborative working would allow the NEWB to harness this experience and develop increasingly responsive services.

Collaborative working with initiatives such as the Home/School/Community/Liaison Scheme (HSCL), School Completion Programme (SCP), the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) would provide the NEWB with the opportunity to link in with other services which are working to prevent educational disadvantage, and which share similar aims and goals. **SVP recommends that greater efforts are made at regional and local levels to ensure more proactive joint working between the NEWB and these initiatives.** This would allow the pooling of resources and capacities to deepen the quality, effectiveness and targeting of interventions, facilitate better shared knowledge and learning about the children and families in question to ensure their needs are met in the optimal way and would also maximise the use of limited resources.

Strategic role in the prevention of absenteeism and educational disadvantage

While the role of individual educational welfare officers includes advocating on behalf of parents, guardians and children who are experiencing difficulty with school attendance, **there may be a wider advocacy role for the organisation as a whole, in terms of addressing the policy-level reasons for absenteeism.** The NEWB is well placed to understand the reasons and causes of absenteeism and as such could develop a strategic goal or focus around advocating for change at policy level where appropriate to address the causes of absenteeism. This might include calling for increased financial support for families on low incomes to help meet the cost of going to school, the expansion of the various school meals programmes and the provision of good quality early childhood care and education, as well as highlighting the need for adequate resourcing of the NEWB itself and other support services targeting children at risk of educational disadvantage, for example the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

In order to feed strategically into the prevention of educational disadvantage, **the NEWB must have a clear conduit into high level policy making within the Department of Education and Science and beyond** – for example, to the Office for Social Inclusion, Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion.

Measuring effectiveness

The collection of data is crucial to monitoring outcomes for children and families assisted by the NEWB. However, data on participation in non-traditional education or training is very hard to come by. There is a gap in our knowledge about early school leavers and where they ‘end up’, i.e. whether they enter further training or employment and the nature of any training/employment which they are engaged in. Given that the remit of the NEWB includes young people between 16 and 17 years of age outside of formal education, the collection of this data will be an essential component of measuring the effectiveness of NEWB interventions into the future. There may be a role for the NEWB in gathering this data. Collaborative working with initiatives such as Youthreach could further inform this work.

While the average number of school days missed by students at primary and post primary level is an explicit and quantitative metric for knowing how effective the NEWB interventions are, it is also important that effectiveness is measured qualitatively, beyond these numbers. **Including service-user perceptions of the NEWB would provide an insight into how the Board’s educational services are experienced.** Asking schools, children, young people and their families about their experience of working with the NEWB would also inform the development of more responsive services in the future and would allow the Board to establish whether the services which it provides allow it to work towards meeting its strategic goals and aims. Gathering the views of other agencies working in the area would also contribute to this, and would pave the way for future interagency collaboration.

Challenges for the future

Resources

The NEWB needs to raise its profile as a key player in addressing and preventing educational disadvantage. To do this will require adequate resourcing. **SVP has been disappointed that since its inception the budget to run the NEWB has never been forthcoming.** Establishing a statutory agency but failing to resource it adequately to fulfil its function creates confusion and cynicism.

Limited resources and the need to promote the importance of the educational welfare service will be a challenge for the NEWB as it faces into an unfavourable economic climate. Resources will determine the level of service which can be provided to children who are non-attenders, and resources will also determine the stage at which interventions are made. In spite of the fact that the NEWB recognises the importance of early intervention, a school does not have to inform the NEWB of a child's absenteeism until he/she has missed 20 days of school - a large proportion of the academic year. Additional resources and collaborative working with other relevant agencies as previously mentioned, would allow educational welfare officers to become involved earlier than this, in line with the aim of preventing absenteeism through early intervention.

Access to services

A key challenge for the NEWB will be to **fulfil its brief in a landscape where funding for critical services such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), speech and language therapy, support for children with special needs and language support continues to be eroded.** The failure to provide the promised number of child and adolescent community mental health teams as committed to under *Towards 2016* means that the NEWB does - and will continue to - experience difficulties in referring children who need this service on – as do their colleagues in the National Educational Psychological Service. The question of how the NEWB can operate in this environment and be required to work around the limited access to these services in addressing the causes of absenteeism and early school leaving must be raised. The NEWB will need to

advocate for the provision of these services, which is likely to put further strain on its own limited resources.

Right to education for all children

Education has until recently been a universal right for all children and young people. However, **this right is being eroded for some students, depending on their immigration status.** The children of student visa holders and the children of some non-EEA migrant workers (at both primary and secondary level) are now facing a situation where they are being told that they are not allowed to attend state schools and must attend private educational institutions, regardless of whether or not they can afford this. The erosion of the right to education for some children devalues the notion of education for all and as the NEWB has a statutory responsibility for ensuring that all children receive an education, it may be called upon to advocate on behalf of these children. **Educational Welfare Officers must be given guidance on how to deal with and progress this issue in the best interests of the children involved.**

Conclusion

SVP recognises the challenges faced by the NEWB in attempting to fulfil its statutory functions under the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, particularly in worsening economic circumstances. The priority for the NEWB in the development of its new strategic plan must be to organise its limited resources in order to ensure that children who are most at risk of educational disadvantage are targeted for actions to prevent absenteeism as well as to address cases of non-attendance when they have become more entrenched. In order for the NEWB to maximise the use of its limited resources, it must:

1. Work collaboratively with other initiatives working to address educational disadvantage;
2. Gain access to high level policy making within relevant Departments to develop policies to prevent absenteeism;
3. Develop a method of evaluating initiatives in order to measure their effectiveness and to establish 'what works'.

References

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