

Introduction

The National Social Justice Committee (NSJC) have identified the need to mitigate the detrimental impact of school closures on children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as a key social justice priority for 2021.

Children and young people have been out of school for a significant part of the last twelve months and the prospect of children being out of school for another month at least is likely to lead to a further loss of learning, poor mental health, and early school leaving. These issues will be difficult to remedy and could potentially trap children in a cycle of poverty and lifelong disadvantage. We are concerned that insufficient attention has been paid to this issue and without a voice, the needs of children living in poverty and experiencing disadvantage will be overlooked.

Key concerns

This has been a particularly difficult time for the families we support, many of whom are living with the effects of poverty and marginalisation. As Members carried out their work in the community remotely, it became abundantly clear that many children and young people living in poverty were not able to continue their learning through home schooling, despite the best efforts of their teachers and parents/carers. Many students are unable to keep up with their schoolwork because they do not have space or the right technology for online learning. For many households struggling on a low income, having a laptop and broadband is a luxury, not a necessity.

Unfortunately, the additional grants for IT equipment provided by the Department of Education were insufficient as Conference have continued to step into the breach providing supports to help address the digital divide during the latest school closures.

The NSJC are particularly concerned for children living in homeless accommodation and direct provision where school is a respite from their cramped living conditions. Through our unique home visitation work, SVP Members regularly support families experiencing 'hidden homelessness', often living in overcrowded and unsuitable

conditions. It is very challenging in such circumstances to study when there is no separate space away from the rest of the family. We have heard from Conferences who support many families with three or four children with a range of ages in one bedroom accommodation facing impossible odds in seeking to make educational progress outside the supports of normal school environment. Children and young people from the Traveller community and those in Direct Provision centres also experience similar difficulties.

Added to this is the fact that not all parents have the skills, time, or health to help children with distance learning, and despite their best efforts, parents with literacy issues or those who are educationally disadvantaged are struggling to support their children's learning at home. For parents where English is not their first language remote learning is incredibly challenging. Our members report supporting families where children as young as twelve have to act as language interpreters for their parents on serious social and housing request issues. The isolation, stress and strain placed on parents due to school closures, is also a significant concern.

The loss of peer supports and social interactions not only through school closures, but also the closure of youth clubs, sports clubs and other community resources is significant. For young people most at risk of disengagement, we are concerned about reports of some falling into criminality due to the loss of the school environment and other protective measures.

The long-term impact of school closures, and associated learning loss and poor mental health, on children and young people already struggling to play catch-up could be substantial unless preventative measures are put in place.

Proposed solutions

It is vital that the Department of Education put in place the resources required to support disadvantaged children and young people whose educational, social, and emotional outcomes have been negatively impacted by school closures and to prevent further educational disadvantage because of COVID-19 restrictions.

Proposals to support families, children and young people living in poverty during school closures:

- Decisions regarding school closures/reopening should be reviewed on a weekly basis in consultation with public health, education partners and experts in child well-being and educational welfare. Special consideration should be given to the risk associated with school closures for children and young people in emergency accommodation, in direct provision, and those at risk of early school leaving.
- Provide training to teachers, where needed, on how best to support disadvantaged and/or disengaged students remotely and promote the issue of live interactions to support social peer interaction and student well-being.
- Establish a €5 million discretionary fund to address the digital divide. Schools should be facilitated to apply on behalf of student(s) who do not have access to laptops, tablets and/or 4G wireless routers due to cost.
- Introduce a temporary top-up payment for Qualified Children (€30 per week for children over 12 and €15 per week for children under 12) to help families with the additional cost of food, electricity, internet and communication services, educational resources, and indoor social activities. This should be made payable to families while schools are closed (Estimated cost per week: €8.4 million).
- Put in place a plan to deal with the fall out of school closures on children and young people experiencing educational disadvantage.

Proposals to support children and young people when schools reopen:

The Department of Education should establish a budget line for supports for children and young people impacted by school closures and at risk of disengagement, significant educational disadvantage, poor well-being and/or early school leaving.

This budget line should provide the resources to:

- Identify students who have experienced significant learning loss (i.e. through a holistic return to school assessment) and offer 1:1 tuition support to students who were unable to continue engaging fully with the school curriculum and experienced learning loss. Extra learning support teaching hours should be provided to all school (DEIS and non-DEIS) where children have been assessed as having fallen behind educationally.
- Run free summer camps for children experiencing disadvantage from DEIS and non-DEIS school.
- Expand Home School Community Liaison support in DEIS schools and extend the initiative to students experiencing disadvantage in non-DEIS schools.
- Provide resources to improve student well-being and linking up with external supports provided by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and the National Educational Psychological Service.
- Properly fund youth services and youth clubs to provide additional peer support to marginalised young people, in particular those living in direct provision or emergency accommodation.