

Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education & Skills

Re: The Irish Traveller Movement replies to invitation to submit to the Oireachtas Education Committee examination of Traveller Education progression to second and third-level

Date: 25th February 2019

The Irish Traveller Movement, "A Movement for Change"- founded in 1990 is a national membership organisation representing Travellers and Traveller organisations, One of its core principles and objectives is to challenge the racism that Travellers face in Ireland, promoting integration and equality within Irish society. It is thus with 28 years' experience of consultation with Travellers on their needs and aspirations for an equitable education system and collective policy analysis, that we submit to the members of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education & Skills. We have recently submitted to the European Council of Europe and the Fundamental Rights Agency on Traveller's experience of Racism, Education and Housing in Ireland and welcome the opportunity to submit to the Joint Oireachtas Committee.

We refer to the Traveller community", the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and by others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland. According to the last Census (2016) 30,987 Travellers were enumerated) accounting for less than one per cent of the total population of Ireland. We believe this figure to be an underestimation, as data from the Department of the Environment and Planning (2017) for accommodation purposes count 11,116 Traveller families or approx. 44,000 Travellers in that context.

Opportunity for change

We would like to draw the committee's attention to the 01 March 2017, when the then Taoiseach, made a historical statement in Dáil Éireann, in which he announced recognition of Travellers as a distinct ethnic group in Ireland this was momentous and unprecedented which recognised Traveller's heritage, culture and identity and special place in Irish society and was a hugely important step towards overcoming the legacy of economic marginalisation, discrimination and low self-esteem experienced. It also supported a new platform for positive engagement for the Traveller community and the Government in together seeking sustainable solutions based on respect and dialogue on these issues and challenges.

Education in historical context

We want to draw the committee's attention to the historical experience of Travellers within the state education system, not commonly known to the wider community. The importance of awareness of the historical experiences of the Traveller population is fundamental to righting the wrongs of the past and instilling confidences going into the future. From 1970s – right up to the present day segregated schools- where Traveller children are educated in Traveller only schools – were in existence. Traveller only classrooms also wide spread from 70s right up to 2000, from, this point Traveller segregation began to be phased out. Many Travellers today recall horrific stories of been washed when they came into school and having separate play times and lunch times to their settled counterparts. The expectations by their teachers were extremely low and with many left to draw pictures and play, leaving school unable to read or write.

Those experiences still influence how Traveller parents engage with the education system as well as respond to their own children's experience of racist bullying within school.

In January 2017 the Department of Justice and Equality commissioned Economic and Social Research report—*"A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland"* found that Travellers experience extreme disadvantage in terms of employment, housing and health and face exceptionally strong levels of prejudice.

Threats to progress

In 2011 Traveller-specific educational supports were cut by 87%. These included the withdrawal of the Visiting Teacher Service, Resource teachers for Travellers in primary schools, allocation of teaching hours in second level schools, and enhanced capitation for primary and second level. These cuts which were made at a time of the highest retention of Travellers pupils from primary to post primary in the State, decimated the support infrastructure for Traveller education and had a detrimental impact on Traveller's educational progression.

National Traveller Education Statistics

The gap between Traveller participation and retention in education has worsened compared with their settled counterparts. Although there are over 8,000 Travellers in education, the statistics provided by the Census of 2016 demonstrate some shocking comparisons;

- Six out of ten male Travellers (57.2 per cent) had only primary level education. This is over four times higher than the general population (13.6 per cent).
- Just 13 per cent of Traveller girls completed second level education compared to 69 per cent of the settled community.
- 57 per cent of Traveller boys had only primary level education compared to 13 per cent in the rest of the population.

- Half of Traveller children do not live in DEIS school catchment areas
- Of those who left second level education early, 55 per cent left by the age of 15.
- 1% of Travellers progressed to third level education. 167 Travellers gained a third level qualification.
- In the National Traveller Survey 2017 4 out of 10 Travellers said they or their children had been bullied in school because of their identity as Traveller

Concerns Prevalent to Traveller Pupils.

Reduced time tables

The Irish Traveller Movement has seen a rising trend in the practice of reduced timetables. In many instances it is Traveller parents who are monitoring and reporting to Traveller organisations and in turn who have brought these concerns to various Ministers, and officials and recently to the Minister for Justice. There is no monitoring of the practice by TUSLA or the Department of Education and Skills, instead the responsibility is placed on parents who encounter the problem to take a complaint via Section 29 of the Education Act. TUSLA's own report -*Developing the Statement of Strategy for School Attendance: Guidelines for Schools* – asks "Does the school attempt to minimise reduced timetables, suspensions and expulsions.

The Irish Traveller Movement is concerned that in certain areas, no school or conversely one school, is actively supporting the inclusion of Travellers. This school then informally becomes the school in the area that Travellers are directed to and becomes seen as 'the Traveller school '. For example, 70% of the students in one particular school in Tuam are members of the Traveller community and this high number of Travellers is not reflected in other schools in the area. Schools who are supporting inclusion are to be commended but, there needs to be a responsibility on all schools and monitoring of the practice which has been described.

Inclusion of Traveller culture and history

The majority of Schools have systematically failed to recognise Traveller culture and history resulting in Travellers and their way of life being invisible across the whole school setting. Also as a result non-Traveller children are denied the opportunity to learn about Traveller culture in a positive learning environment and increasing the chance of their views being formed by the negative stereotypical views of Travellers that persist in wider society. This was evidenced through the Yellow Flag Programme, where teachers recount fears about "how to approach the inclusion of Traveller culture" within the curriculum as they don't feel that they are informed enough, don't have the right terminology and or that they may

come across as being racist. The Yellow Flag programme is an innovative model that supports the inclusion of Travellers as part of wider intercultural measures, in schools who have opted to take on the programme.

Recently Senator Colette Kelleher commenced a bill on the inclusion of Traveller history and culture within the mainstream curriculum that has galvanised both government and cross-party support and has full community support.

Other matters affecting Traveller student's engagement and progression in school include:

1. Traveller children are leaving secondary school unable to read reducing opportunity in all aspects of their lives.
2. Increased numbers of Travellers leaving primary school with poor numeracy and literacy without the skills they need to navigate within post primary, strong anecdotal evidence supports this over many years, however neither TUSLA nor the DES monitor its extent.
3. Poor practice (Traveller children in class rooms not being assessed and often ascribed inadequate work levels.)
4. Pupils in the school are given the yearly school booklist except the Traveller children.
5. School culture- Traveller identity is not celebrated; however, Traveller children are made to feel different every day within school life.
6. This is a pervasive practice in many areas, of indirect barriers to Travellers in enrolment, where children and parents are encouraged into a community / vocational education. Racism and prejudice is holding Traveller children back with Traveller students in some instances, traveling 100miles per week to their secondary school, when there is a local school less than a 5min walk away: Not enough is being done to monitor the experience of Traveller children within education at a localised level.
7. The very low expectation by some Teachers with preconceived views on the Traveller community with no training on Traveller culture and identity hindering Traveller learning and development.
8. Identity based bullying affects Traveller children specifically, both in their everyday experience and self-esteem, and their progression outcomes and motivation.
9. Some children are coming into school from poor substandard accommodation without access to basic facilities, electricity, sanitation and hot and cold water.

Government Policy

Irish Traveller Movement welcomed The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2024 with a comprehensive action plan focused on accommodation, public service, culture & identity, health, anti-racism, children & youth, employment, gender equality and a range of specific actions seeking to address some of the many issues impacting on Traveller education

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) in previous years also developed a number of policy documents to support the inclusion of children of non-Irish nationals as well as Traveller children in the Irish Education system. While essential and welcome, the Traveller specific ones were non-regulatory and lacked implementation frameworks. These included the Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy 2006 and the Primary and Post Primary Intercultural Guidelines. The Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015; and more recently the DES Action Plan on Bullying 2013 recognised that some children, particularly children of non-Irish nationals & Traveller children are more vulnerable to racist bullying because of their identity and recommended that preventative strategies needed to be put in place by schools to address this,

The ESRI found one of the many reasons for leaving school early are likely to be the negative experiences of Traveller children in school Traveller children (along with immigrant children and those with a disability) are significantly more likely to report being bullied at school (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016)

The National Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 included a goal specific to Travellers to increase the number Traveller in higher education, proposing a target of full and part-time undergraduate new entrants of (80) (2019) linked to the National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy. There is no data available to assess the bursary scheme extended to third level institutions in 2016 to "promote participation for underrepresented groups, including Travellers". The National Traveller Education Policy the *'Traveller Education Strategy'* remains inactive and has no binding or related implementation plan. However, when it was published 13 years ago it included the following goals to be achieved within a five-year period

The goals of the Traveller Education Strategy included that in a five-year period (2006-2011):

- That the proportion of Traveller children transferring to post-primary education should increase from 85% to 100% in 2017 the ERSI report *'A Social Portrait of Travellers'* found Travellers were over 50 times more likely to leave school without a Leaving Certificate in comparison to the non-Traveller population.
- *That all Traveller pupils should remain in school and complete the junior cycle yet in 2017 only (9%) of Travellers aged 25-34 have completed second level education compared with 86% nationally.*
- *That 50 per cent of those who complete the junior cycle should complete the senior cycle; full parity with the settled community should be the target of the next phase*

but in 2017 Only 8% of working-age Travellers compared to 73% of non-Travellers had reached leaving certificate

- In conclusion it recommended that *Traveller pupils should have equality of access, participation and outcome in an inclusive school that acknowledges and respects their Traveller identity and culture; their post-primary education should be a positive experience.*

It also recommended that: *Data are needed to monitor transfer, attendance, attainment, and retention, stating "Transfer, attendance, attainment and retention should be monitored by parents, schools, the VTST, NEWB, DES, and others. "*

The Department of Education POD system- Primary Online Database - became effective from Sept 2016. Information related to Travellers is collected as one of two optional fields of data as these are considered sensitive personal information under the Data Protection Acts, they can only be recorded on POD with the explicit written consent of the pupil's parent(s) or guardian(s). There is no data available to record where Travellers are at risk of early school leaving, the locations and monitoring of schools where this is presenting. This measure would ensure more effective targeting strategies in those areas and redress outstanding issues arising. Travellers are experiencing barriers which impede their progress in education,

Recommendation's

- 1) Monitor and collate data nationally as a matter of priority where Travellers are at risk of early school leaving, locations and specific schools
- 2) Establish a Traveller specific education strategy as matter of urgency, with a robust overseeing structure, targeted goals and adequate resourcing, to give real effect to ensure Traveller students receive a quality education, without the barriers they face in the very system designed to deliver that education
- 3) That the Department of Education and Skills or TUSLA collect data on the practice of reduced timetables and develop a Statement Strategy for School Attendance and mandatory controls for Schools.
- 4) Restore funding to support Traveller retention within education to level prior to 2011, including funding in the school setting and towards Traveller organisations to monitor and inform the implementation of policy and support good practice in the delivery of Traveller education.
- 5) Intercultural awareness training should form a mandatory component of continued Teacher professional development, to break down negative stereotypes and anti-Traveller racism in school environment.

- 6) That the State and the Department of Education and Skills support the call for the inclusion of Traveller History and Culture within the mainstream Primary and Post Primary curriculum.