



**Submission to the Joint Oireachtas  
Committee on Key Issues Affecting  
the Traveller Community**

Education and the Traveller  
Community

12/11/2019

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## CONTEXT

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 Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community.

We refer to the Traveller community, as 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.

This submission follows two submissions to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills, one on the examination of Traveller Education progression to second and third-level (May 2019)<sup>1</sup> and the second on the examination of reduced timetables (June 2019)<sup>2</sup>. The Irish Traveller Movement urges the Department of Education and Skills to resource and implement the recommendations from these reports.

## ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND THE ADEQUACY OF FUNDING FOR TRAVELLER SPECIFIC EDUCATION SERVICES

In Budget 2011, Traveller-specific education supports were cut by 86.6%, disproportionate compared to cutbacks across mainstream educational settings. The Visiting Teacher for Travellers Service (VTTS) was reduced by 100% (a loss of 42 posts), Resource Teachers for Travellers (RTT) cut by 100% resulting in the withdrawal for some Travellers of essential resources to improve educational attainment and transition levels. 33 Senior Traveller Training Centres were closed. In that year, only half of all Traveller children lived in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) catchment areas.<sup>3</sup> 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.

Anecdotally the rates of early school, leaving among the Traveller population has increased, having a detrimental effect on the retention of Traveller children in education. To replace some of the cuts made in 2011, the State gave supports to schools in the form of capitation grants, where an individual Traveller pupil might require additional or special supports, of €70 per pupil for Primary and €201 per pupil in Post-Primary. However, support for other “in need” learners ranges from approximately €450-850 per pupil. In 2018/2019 there were 2,916 Traveller pupils in receipt of support.

Despite welcome State efforts towards Traveller education progression in third-level, retention in primary and post-primary has not been focused on enough, and there has been no restoration of the budgetary cuts (86-100%) in 2011 and no increase in budget 2020.

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%) had only primary-level education; four times higher than the general population (13.6%).

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<sup>1</sup> [Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on the Committee’s Examination on the Progression of Travellers from Primary-, to Secondary- and Third-Level Education \(May 2019\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills, Interim Report on the Committee’s Examination on the Current Use of Reduced Timetables, June 2019](#)

<sup>3</sup> Number of Pupils who are Members of the Traveller Community, February 2017, Department of Education and Skills. Available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/Membership-of-the-Traveller-Community-2000-2001-2015-2016.pdf>

- Just 13% of Traveller girls completed second-level education compared to 69% of the settled community.
- 57% of Traveller boys had only primary level education compared to 13% 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% by the age of 15.
- Only 1% of Travellers have ever progressed to third-level education (167 Travellers) across the State, and 55% overall had school left by the age of 15.
- 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
- Travellers were over 50 times more likely to leave school without a Leaving Certificate that is <sup>4</sup> only 8% of working-age Travellers compared to 73% of non-Travellers had reached Leaving Certificate<sup>5</sup>.

## **FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO, PERCEIVED STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH BEING A TRAVELLER AND THE DISCRIMINATION OF TRAVELLERS WITHIN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM AND BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SECOND AND THIRD-LEVEL EDUCATION**

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 has been no monitoring of the practice by TUSLA or the Department of Education and Skills. Instead, the responsibility has been placed on parents who encounter the problem to make 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.

In September 2019 following a campaign by the Irish Traveller Movement's and other NGOs in the special needs sector the Minister announced that schools would be required to give formal notification of the use of reduced timetables. Views were sought from officials of the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and TUSLA Educational Welfare Service, and arrangements to facilitate the notification and monitoring of reduced timetables have been agreed, and due to take effect from Jan 2020.

Racism and discrimination towards Travellers in broader society is reflected within the education system and continues to present a significant challenge for Travellers. In 2017, 4 out of 10 Travellers said they

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<sup>4</sup> A Social Report on Travellers in Ireland. (2017) ESRI. Dorothy Watson, Oona Kenny and Frances McGinnity

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

or their children had been bullied in school because of their identity as a Traveller<sup>6</sup>. The ESRI found that one of the many reasons for children leaving school early is likely to be the negative experiences of Traveller children in school<sup>7</sup>. Traveller children (along with immigrant children and those with a disability) are significantly more likely to report being bullied at school<sup>8</sup>.

The Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015<sup>9</sup>; and more recently the Department of Education and Skills Action Plan on Bullying 2013<sup>10</sup> recognised that some children, particularly children of non-Irish nationals and 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. Regrettably, the National Traveller Education Policy, the *'Traveller Education Strategy'* remains inactive 13 years later.

In 2019, the Department of Education and Skills conducted a Review of the Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy, which included consultation with Traveller representative organisations. The State focus has relied on a model to progress via DEIS schools. However, only 50% of Travellers attend DEIS schools, and so half of all Travellers pupils cannot access supports such as Home School Community Liaisons and the School Excellence Fund. The Home School Community Liaisons, in particular, supports parents to engage with schools.

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 occurring. This measure would ensure more effective targeting strategies in those areas and redress outstanding or arising issues. Without a visiting teaching service or a similar alternative, the groundwork required is disjointed and not visible.

## **Other matters affecting Traveller student's engagement and progression in school**

### **Including:**

1. Traveller children are leaving secondary school unable to read reducing opportunity in all aspects of their lives.
2. Increased numbers of Travellers are leaving primary school with poor numeracy and literacy and therefore impacting their ability to navigate post-primary, strong anecdotal evidence supports this over many years. However, neither TUSLA nor the DES monitors its extent.
3. Poor practice of Traveller children in classrooms not being assessed and often ascribed inadequate work levels. Traveller children with additional needs or learning difficulties have compounded difficulties and find it even more challenging to succeed in school as additional support is not pushed for.
4. In some incidents, pupils in the school are given the yearly school booklist except for the Traveller children.
5. School culture- Traveller identity is not acknowledged or celebrated; however, Traveller children are made to feel different every day within school life.
6. Indirect barriers to Travellers in enrolment - this is a pervasive practice in many areas where children and parents are encouraged into a community/vocational education. Racism and prejudice are holding Traveller children back with Traveller students in some instances, travelling 100miles per week to their secondary school when there is a local school less than a 5min walk

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<sup>6</sup> National Traveller Survey – Attitudes of and to the Traveller Community. Behaviour and Attitudes, Market Research. Oct 2017

<sup>7</sup> A Social Report on Travellers in Ireland. (2017) ESRI. Dorothy Watson, Oona Kenny and Frances McGinnity

<sup>8</sup> State of the Nation's Children, Ireland 2016. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs

<sup>9</sup> Intercultural Education Strategy, 2010- 2015 (2010) Department of Education and Skills and the Office of the Minister for Integration

<sup>10</sup> Action Plan On Bullying Report of the Anti-Bullying Working Group to the Minister for Education and Skills January 2013

away- Not enough is being done to monitor the experience of Traveller children within education at a localised level.

7. Low expectations by some teachers. The preconceived views of Teachers toward the Traveller community hinder Traveller learning and development. This is compounded by the lack of training on Traveller culture and identity.
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 inhuman, substandard accommodation without access to necessary facilities, electricity, sanitation and hot and cold water.

## **Case Studies**

3<sup>rd</sup> Class Primary School 2019

*Our daughter is seven years old. She is bright, intelligent and loves school and all that education can offer. As parents, we do everything asked of us for our children's education. Our daughter had been telling us how she wants to be a doctor when she grows up so that she can help other children; however, her behaviour has changed. She isn't the happy-go-lucky girl she was and has become more distant from us. Our daughter is very easily upset and cries and now tells us, she doesn't like school anymore. She draws pictures of others with angry faces and talks about having no friends in her class. Most sad of all, she recently said: "I can't be myself any more mummy in school, and I want to leave". Our daughter has been experiencing identity-based bullying.*

A 16-year-old student in 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Post-Primary 2019.

*I love music and art, and I want to be a musician and a model. I'm really scared to tell my class that I'm a Traveller and have anxiety about this. Most of my class have said that they are already racist and that their parents don't like us (Travellers) living in their area. Some of my class called us knackers, and most of the rest nodded in agreement. I'm the only Traveller in this class. I don't want to tell my teacher. It could make my situation worse.*

## **WILLINGNESS OF THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY TO ENGAGE WITH EDUCATIONAL SERVICES AND SCHOOLS**

We want to draw the committee's attention to the historical institutionalised racism experienced by Travellers within the Irish state education system, not commonly widely known to the wider general settled population. The importance of raising awareness of this dark historical treatment of the Traveller population is fundamental to addressing wrongs and towards instilling future confidence. From the 1970s, right up to the present day segregated schools (where Traveller children are educated in Traveller only schools) were in existence. Traveller only classrooms were also widespread from the 70s right up to 2000 until segregation began to be phased with pressure mounting to address the treatment of Travellers by Traveller rights groups including the Irish Traveller Movement. Many Travellers today recall horrific stories of being washed when they came into school and having separate playtimes and lunchtimes to their settled general population. 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 do not have confidence within an education system which has historically mistreated them so badly, making them feel unworthy of an education designed for the majority with no context of their identity within and where their children continue to experience racist bullying, isolation and have to hide their identity.

The Irish Traveller Movement conducted focus groups in November 2019 with children between the ages of 14-21yrs who currently are subject to indifference and low expectations of teachers, where they are encouraged to sit at the back of a class and there is not value put on their contribution.

## **SOLUTIONS TO ENCOURAGE THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY TO REMAIN IN SCHOOL AND CONTINUE ON TO THIRD LEVEL EDUCATION, INCLUDING APPRENTICESHIPS**

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. Non-Traveller children are also, therefore, denied the opportunity to learn about Traveller culture in a positive learning environment and to increase the chance of their views being formed by the negative stereotypical views of Travellers that persist in challenging 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 do not feel that they are informed enough, do not 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 broader intercultural measures, in schools who have opted to take on the programme.

Traveller Culture and History are not visible within the Pre, Primary and Post-Primary education curriculum, and there are no mandatory guidelines for schools on the matter. Travellers, as Ireland’s only indigenous minority, their way of life and historical context to Ireland’s shared history, is not taught or referenced across the whole school setting. The opportunity to learn about Traveller culture in a positive learning environment and therefore combat racism, prejudice and discrimination is neglected. The Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018 passed through the Seanad (Oct 2019) which seeks to amend the Education Act, to make provision for inclusion of Traveller history and culture within the mainstream curriculum. This Bill has full support from the Traveller Community.

We welcome Minister McHugh’s statements in the Seanad *“It is from the dark, uncomfortable aspects of our history including our treatment of members of the Traveller Community, among many other marginalised groups, that we learn the most important lessons. There are no shortage of examples in the world in which we live where the lack of understanding of history and different cultures has been the cause of crisis. I am fully supportive of actions which aim to improve educational outcomes for Travellers, and that includes ensuring that the school setting is a more welcoming environment Recognising and respecting Traveller culture and history ensures that we can build relationships based on trust, respect, and understanding across all cultures.*

Irish Traveller Movement also 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 several 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 Traveller Education Policy, the *‘Traveller Education Strategy’* was reviewed in 2019 and has been mapped across existing strategies but does not have a ring-fenced budget. 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

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 is 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 address outstanding issues that arise. Travellers are experiencing barriers which impede their progress in education.

The National Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 included a goal to increase the number of Travellers in higher education, proposing a target of 80 full and part-time undergraduate new entrants, linked to the National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy<sup>11</sup>. No updated data is available on the uptake of a bursary scheme extended to third-level institutions in 2016, however, in year 1 (2017/18), 10 of the possible 200 were taken up by Traveller students.

Despite this welcome intervention, anecdotal evidence points to some Travellers being unable to afford necessities such as travel and accommodation, even with access to the 1916 Bursary. A clear and committed strategy is needed by the Government to ensure Travellers are enabled to progress from primary to post-primary as a priority.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Monitor and collate data nationally as a matter of priority where Travellers are at risk of early school leaving, locations and specific schools and for the Department of Education and Skills to publish its disaggregated data on the basis of ethnicity from secondary schools (PPOD) to monitor participation and outcomes of Traveller students
2. Establish a Traveller-specific education strategy or National Action Plan on Traveller education as a matter of urgency, with a robust overseeing structure, targeted goals and adequate resourcing.

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<sup>11</sup> CUMASÚ - Empowering through learning Action Plan for Education 2019. Prepared by the Department of Education and Skills

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. That Traveller organisations be consulted in the process.
4. Restore funding to support Traveller retention within education to the level prior to 2011, including funding in the school setting and for Traveller organisations specially on to address inequalities in 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 the 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
7. Provide the Yellow Flag Programme will reliable and sustainable core funding in order to strengthen and secure the long-term impact it can have on the Irish education system.
8. That the State recognises, supports and resources the cultural education and language needs of Traveller children.
9. We call for the state to recognise the historical treatment of the Traveller community and institutionalised racism that is resulting in children being segregated from the wider settled population.
10. We call for the Committee to further examine the institutionalised treatment of the Traveller community within education.
11. That the Minister makes immediate headway on actions to ensure that national Traveller representative groups are included among the partner groups consulted by the Inspectorate as inspection frameworks
12. To increase the capitation, grant for Travellers in education pro-rata to other groups.

## APPENDIX – YOUNG TRAVELLERS FORUM

The Irish Traveller Movement established a Young Travellers Forum in 2019 for 14 and 21-year-olds. The forum aims to develop a National Traveller Youth Leadership Strategy 2020 to 2023. The Irish Traveller Movement is leading the Young Travellers Forum with involvement from organisations working with Young Travellers including Irish Traveller Movement members and non-members. It is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union and the Community Foundation for Ireland.

On Saturday the 2nd of November the second in a series of Forums was held in Tullamore, and young people attended from Dublin, Meath, Galway and Offaly. The top three priority issues identified by the group (aged 14-18) were Crime, Education and Mental Health, although other items such as accommodation and discrimination were also highlighted as important.

Issues raised by participants:

- **Identity-Based Bullying:** Reported as both physical and verbal bullying.
- **Low Expectations:** Reported where teachers put Travellers at the back of classes, not valuing them as much as settled people and using Travellers for sports instead of academic reasons.
- **Supports:** The need for more support in school and more information and assistance in grant writing so that less cost goes onto the household and being in education is a motivator.
- **Value of Education:** The Traveller economy is declining in terms of income, so there is a need to increase the value of education within the Community.
- **Early School Leavers,** factors such as not liking school, bullying, literacy and not feeling comfortable around young settled people were raised as causes for early school leaving.
- **Traveller Culture** not being seen in the classroom was brought up as an issue.

The views held by the Young Travellers Forum closely align to the above submission from the Irish Traveller Movement, and this account provides up to date and geographical validity. It is clear that the Young Travellers who were present did not feel entirely welcome or valued at school, and work must be done to rectify this. They also want to reflect a need for signposting to grants and support concerning literacy and an equal level of expectation. There was a clear ask for interventions to prevent identity-based bullying.