

Submission to the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth By the Irish Traveller Movement

Re: The new 10-year Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy

Date: 11th May 2023

Background

Founded in 1990, the Irish Traveller Movement is the national advocacy and membership platform which brings together Travellers and representative organisations to develop collective solutions on issues faced by the community to achieve greater equality for Travellers. We represent Traveller interests in national governmental, international and human rights settings. We challenge racism-individual, cultural and structural which Travellers face and promote integration and equality. We are led by our grass roots community membership, deliver expertise in shaping organisations locally and promote community leadership ensuring Traveller's voices are to the forefront of all discussions.

The Irish Traveller Movement is mandated by our membership of over 40 local Traveller groups to bring forward policy and related matters to national structures and represented on the national NTRIS Education Sub-committee coordinated under the Department of Education (DE). We are also the innovator of the Yellow Flag Programme -the school based intercultural programme.

Context

Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority confirmed by historical sources to be part of Irish society for centuries. Travellers' long shared history, cultural values, language, customs and traditions make them a self-defined group and one which is recognisable and distinct. Traveller culture and way of life, of which nomadism is an essential factor, is distinct from the settled population.

Census 2016 showed 30,987 Travellers self-identified, but a closer estimation of population is found in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, (DHLGH) last available data 2019, where 10,809 families were enumerated (between 45,397 and 57,287 people) throughout the 31 local authority areas.

Travellers are among the most marginalised communities in Ireland. Long term exclusion, and experience of discrimination has had a detrimental effect on Traveller's life chances and outcomes across the various social indicators such as health, education, employment, and socio-economic status.

Gaps in participation, progression and achievement between Travellers and their settled counterparts in education are significantly lower and show in the Education Statistics.

Education Statistics

- In 2016 only 13% of Travellers versus 92% non-Travellers **completed senior cycle at second level.**¹
- 2019 enrolment shows a **total nationally in primary and post primary education of 11,397 pupils**, 4,136 girls and 4,169 boys in primary and 1,610 girls and 1,482 boys in post-primary.²
- In 2017 only **8% of working-age Travellers** compared to 73% of non-Travellers **had reached leaving certificate** at second level.³
- **57% of Traveller boys had only primary-education** compared to 13% nationally.⁴
- **13% of female Traveller were educated to upper secondary level** or above compared with 69.1% if the general population.⁵
- Of those who left second level education early, **55% left by the age of 15.**⁶
- **4 out of 10 Travellers** said they or their children **had been bullied** in school because of their identity as Travellers.⁷

¹ CSO, Available:

<https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/presspages/2017/census2016profile8-irishtravellersethnicityandreligion/> (last opened 11 May 2023).

² Department of Education POD and PPOD on request.

³ A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland (2017), Available: <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS56.pdf>.

⁴ CSO, Available:

<https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/presspages/2017/census2016profile8-irishtravellersethnicityandreligion/> (last opened 11 May 2023).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Behaviours & Attitudes (2017), Traveller Community National Survey. Available at:

https://exchangehouse.ie/publications_nationaltravellersurvey2017.php (last opened 11 May 2023).

⁷ Ibid

Introduction and abstract

We welcome the invitation to the consultation event on 3rd May 2023 and the opportunity to submit observations and recommendations to the development of the new 10-year Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy.

We also welcome that the research underlying the development of the strategy reviewed the needs of diverse learners and children and young people experiencing educational disadvantages in general and Traveller children in particular, identifying Traveller education as an area that “requires prioritisation”.

We welcome the recommendations made on pages 168-169; 189-190; 201, including establishing a “rights-based approach incorporating access to resources to address socio-economic disadvantage that moves with families”. However, the recommendations do not suffice to address the immense barriers and challenges Travellers face in the education system.

We note with concern that both the research and the study of the emerging key observations miss the chance to **address Anti-Traveller racism** and the marginalisation of Travellers and its directly **negative effects on education** and learning outcomes for Traveller children. **Decades of neglect, marginalisation and exclusion have led to low literacy, numeracy and digital literacy among Travellers** - nomadism, which has been made illegal in 2002 by the Criminal Trespass Act⁸ is only a small factor in this.

Traveller children and their families **face enormous barriers and challenges** in participating and progressing in education and therefore, in acquiring the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. We refer to the detailed account of these barriers and challenges further down (from page 5), but draw your attention to the **widespread application of reduced school days** for Travellers, the **parent’s negative experiences with the education system** posing a barrier and the **inequities in accessing broadband and digital supports and overall inadequate living conditions**. We further highlight that Traveller children **very often encounter low-level expectations by teachers and schools** which endorse a mindset that places no value on a Traveller child. Traveller children often meet the expectation that they will not proceed to further education leading to little investment in the child’s education, which then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

⁸ See

<https://www.landlawandjustice.eu/traveller-nomadism-in-ireland-state-illegality-and-criminalisation-of-culture/#::~:tex t=Part%20IIA%20of%20the%20Criminal,the%20permission%20of%20the%20landowner> (last opened 11 May 2023);

Part IIA of the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994

<https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2002/act/9/section/24/enacted/en/html> (last opened 11 May 2023).

In order to overcome these challenges and to ensure that Travellers achieve the same literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills as their settled counter parts, the new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy needs to (1) **recognise and address racism as a contributing factor to low education outcomes** of Traveller children, (2) **address all factors** listed further down (from page 5) that cause barriers and challenges for Traveller children and their families in participating and progressing in education (3) and acknowledge the need of and provide for a **holistic and comprehensive, targeted and whole-of-government approach** in order to bring Travellers up to a parity with everyone else in the country. This requires an alignment with existing strategies, such as the [National Action Plan Against Racism 2023-2027](#), the [Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying 2022](#), the [National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy \(NTRIS\) 2017 - 2021](#) (and the successor to be launched in 2023), the [Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019-2021](#), and the [Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy](#) together with the still outstanding **Traveller Education Strategy**.⁹

Most importantly, the **strategy needs** to include a number of concrete actions and ensure their implementation, fully listed further down (from page 9), from calling for the long-overdue **Traveller Education Strategy** to be developed and implemented to **embed Traveller culture and language in the school curriculums** to acting against a **disproportionate use of reduced timetables** to putting in place **Traveller-specific resources** and education supports. The latter must include **funding for Education Support and Policy Officers in all local, regional and national Traveller organisations**. Lastly, **Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinators** must be installed in all schools, not only Deis schools.

Observations with regard to the research ‘Towards a New Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy - A Review of the Literature’

We welcome that the research reviewed the needs of diverse learners and children and young people experiencing educational disadvantages in general and Traveller children in particular, identifying Traveller education as an area that “requires prioritisation”.

The research states that they had limited literature to their disposal. There is however, a vast amount of literature, reports and statistics available which provide information on the experiences of Traveller children in the education system and impacts on literacy, numeracy and digital literacy

⁹ A list of further applicable strategies can also be found here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/531ef5-co-ordination-of-traveller-education/#report-and-recommendations-for-a-traveller-education-strategy> (last opened 11 May 2023).

of Travellers. For example, [Dr Maria Quinlan: Out of the Shadows, Traveller & Roma Education: Voices from the community](#), the [No End in Sight Report \(2021\)](#), the [Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy](#), [East Cork Travellers Research Report \(2016\)](#), [A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland \(2017\)](#), [IHREC Submission to the Anti-Racism Committee \(2021\)](#) - all with further references, to name a few.

We also notice with concern that nomadism is identified as a key challenge. Most Travellers are not able to live a nomadic lifestyle today and have not been able to do so for decades, with nomadism having been made illegal in 2002 by the Criminal Trespass Act.¹⁰ We refer to the list of barriers and challenges that impact Travellers' literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills (from page 5).

Observations with regard to the 'Emerging key observations from the consultation phase' document

With devastating statistics with regard to learning outcomes of children of disadvantaged educational backgrounds, including Traveller children, it is surprising that the key observations from the consultation phase nowhere address the need for an inclusive educational approach and a need for targeted measures to address the disadvantages, barriers and challenges of the concerned children to improve literacy, numeracy and digital literacy outcomes and to ensure that no child is left behind.

We observe that the consultation lacks consultation with the Traveller Community, their representatives and Traveller organisations. With Travellers among the most marginalised communities in Ireland and the long term exclusion and experience of discrimination manifesting in Travellers' literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills, this poses a concern about how impactful the new 10-year Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy can be for Traveller children, who need it most.

Barriers and challenges to literacy, numeracy and digital literacy for Travellers

- **Decades of neglect, marginalisation and exclusion** have led to low literacy, numeracy and digital literacy among Travellers.
- The **long called for Traveller Education Strategy** across primary, post primary and higher/further education, is still anticipated, and critical to defeating early school leaving

¹⁰ See

<https://www.landlawandjustice.eu/traveller-nomadism-in-ireland-state-illegality-and-criminalisation-of-culture/#::~:tex t=Part%20IIA%20of%20the%20Criminal,the%20permission%20of%20the%20landowner> (last opened 11 May 2023);

Part IIA of the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994

<https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2002/act/9/section/24/enacted/en/html> (last opened 11 May 2023).

and the impacts on literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. Its development and implementation needs to be expedited by dedicated staff and in full consultation with the Traveller community and Traveller organisations.

- **Traveller-specific education supports** that were cut by 86-100% in 2011, **have not been restored** despite recommendations by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to address Ireland's obligations under the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)¹¹. Impacts from these cuts have taken more than a decade to erase, and little evidence of improvements in completion rates since then, or equivalent supports in the system towards retention.
- The **Traveller Education Strategy 2006 had no associated action plan or budget** and remained dormant until the actions of the NTRIS 2017 reasserted some of the aims of that plan, but **progress has been slower than anticipated**. The Programme for Government committed to developing a cross departmental Traveller Education Strategy which spans early years up to third level, however the development and implementation is still outstanding.
- The **Lack of Traveller-specific supports and resources** means among other things that the majority of local, regional and national Traveller organisations **have no Education Development and Policy Officers**, desperately needed to address educational and literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs of Traveller children and families. Anecdotal evidence from the small number of organisations who have designated Education Officers, clearly indicates that Education Officers in Traveller organisations are key drivers of the change needed for Traveller children to participate and progress in education and provide desperately needed support to parents and schools.
- Gaps for Travellers in **accessing ELC programs, high barriers and experience of exclusion** for Travellers and the **lack of access to after school programmes** pose barriers to acquiring full literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.
- **Retention of Travellers in post primary** is a serious challenge due to **early school leaving**. As a result, only 1% of Travellers have progressed to third level¹. There is **no emphasis on targeted supports or a national oversight plan in second level with the capacity** to ensure the Traveller student is supported across the lifetime of their education to enhance the possibility of improving retention and attainment.

¹¹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016), *Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Ireland*. Available:

<http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPRiCAqhKb7yhsvOufvUWRUJLHlLHKqpXZxUGOtzQF0l%2B37QzAKosbh7yc40d4J3lYnFaWf0Egu6J99RK6Y%2FTHjped5r1H3f3KQliFieFkoeAPALAwKpbZz> (last opened 11 May 2023)

- An increase in DEIS schools in 2022 is welcome, but will not suffice to give enough Traveller children access. While updated statistics are still anticipated, numbers before the update were concerning, in that only **half** of Traveller children do **not live in DEIS school catchment areas**, which means that **only 50% of Travellers attend DEIS schools**, and so half of all Traveller pupils cannot access supports such as Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinators and the School Excellence Fund, desperately needed to make up for deficits in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. We know from our members that the HSCL coordinators are sometimes the only ones perceptible to engaging with Traveller organisations to achieve better learning outcomes for Traveller children. Anecdotal evidence suggests that HSCL officers serve as reliable supports for Traveller parents, children and organisations and are needed in every school, DEIS and Non-DEIS.
- Data collection by the DE / schools at point of entry for Travellers is working and central to assessing levels of retention and enrolment but is too limited to alert and remedy essential obstacles, and there continues to be reluctance in making the information available to Traveller organisations, information which is critical to inform future policy decisions and actions. Also concerning is a lack of processing intersectional experiences (e.g. Traveller ethnicity and female, disability, or/and LGBTIQ+ experience - with statistical evidence indicating e.g. a higher rate of disability across the community (20%)) in the data, which is then mainstreamed and not accounted for in government planning and resources.
- Can't see, can't be: **Lack of visibility of Traveller culture in the curriculum and in teaching practice** means that Travellers cannot see themselves or their culture recognised, celebrated, or reflected within the education system or develop a sense of belonging in the school environment.
- The **parental experience**, their own low literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills, low education levels, negative experiences of the education system and lack of confidence in the system can present barriers for their children, e.g. a limited capacity to help with homework.

"When I am getting my kids ready for school my heart sinks, they are too young to know what is coming but sure enough it will hit them at some stage. I am hardened to it; I know I will be treated badly in every place I go that day. I can handle it because I am used to it, but my heart breaks for them every day. It sucks the spirit out of you, I go to bed drained and dreading the next day."

- Quote from [South Dublin Travellers Report 2021](#), p. 23.

- **Covid-19 exposed and further caused educational disadvantages.** The exact impact on Traveller pupils in leaving cert 2020 and for 2021 and on their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy level is unknown. *(More under challenges for digital literacy.)*

"The children also spoke about how overcrowding in their mobile homes impacted on their ability to get their homework done. Two teenagers talked about the impact of there being no Wi-Fi on the site in terms of schoolwork and connecting with others through social media. They described a complete lack of privacy in their mobile units."

- Quote from [No End in Site - An investigation into the living conditions of children on a local authority halting site](#), p. 17.

- Identity based **bullying**, and **low-level expectation of teachers/schools** of Traveller pupils prevents Travellers from realising their potential. A prevalent mindset by teachers and schools **that places no value on a Traveller child** and the expectation of teachers and schools that Traveller children will not proceed to further education lead to little investment in the child's education and to the Traveller child being excluded and left behind. For example, anecdotal evidence indicates that Traveller children are placed at the back of the class and are told to engage with colouring pages or given a tablet to watch TV shows to occupy themselves no matter their age, while the rest of the class receives their education.

"He told my son [there is] no point in you coming in because when you're 16 you'll leave and get married. Says I, he's only 14 now so will you give him a chance."

- Quote from [Dr Maria Quinlan: Out of the Shadows, Traveller & Roma Education: Voices from the community](#), p. 18.

- **Traveller children are often excluded from Irish classes** based on substantial anecdotal evidence, which both speaks to how little value is placed on Traveller children and is a barrier to achieving the highest level of literacy. For example, an autistic Traveller pupil at primary level was exempted from learning Irish despite his obvious ability based on the ingrained practice to exempt Traveller children from Irish classes.
- **Application of reduced school days for Travellers is widespread** based on substantial anecdotal evidence. New DE guidelines were introduced in 2022 but there is no system of monitoring schools who misuse this practice. Furthermore, three quarterly 'TUSLA Reduced Day Monitoring Reports' are long overdue to be published, data which is necessary to address this practice effectively so as to stop the serious impact on literacy, numeracy and digital literacy learning outcomes.
- High **homelessness** rates and 6,000 Traveller **children and families living in inadequate, unsafe and impermanent conditions**, well below basic human rights standards, impede not only on children's health, but their educational outcomes. With a lack of access to basic facilities, such as water and electricity and living in overcrowded accommodation without sufficient access to play facilities, access to sufficient space for study and learning or

provision of wifi have detrimental effects on children's psychosocial development, early years development and educational participation and progression.

"it's like an abandoned place that people forgot about, it's like we're forgotten, we feel like garbage"
- Quote from a girl (12) from [No End in Site - An investigation into the living conditions of children on a local authority halting site](#), p. 17.

- The **acquisition of information** on early learning, care settings, primary and post-primary schools and the **accessibility of the administrative process** required to access early learning and care settings, primary and post-primary schools can present a substantial barrier for some Travellers. Information only presented in writing, accompanied by a general lack of outreach to Travellers, results in a lack of information. Completing multiple forms, and provision of documentation can be daunting and it is important that these processes are made as user-friendly, uncomplicated, and flexible as possible. Lastly, Traveller parents experience significant discrimination when applying for places and when places are allocated.

In particular, challenges to digital literacy

- **Covid-19 exposed inequality in terms of digital and remote learning access** for Traveller children which resulted in Travellers falling further behind and prompting early school leaving with huge impact on their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. Differences in the approach taken by schools during Covid-19 showed. While some schools were supportive of Traveller children and parents and addressed the digital barriers, **many were not engaging at all or refused to adapt new online systems to suit Travellers who don't have access to printers/laptops** etc. We have accounts of Traveller organisations printing and distributing children's school work during Covid-19 due to a lack of resources, computers and printers in Traveller families.
- **Inequities in accessing broadband and digital supports** are acknowledged by the Government but Travellers were not named in support measures applied to vulnerable pupils. Without data collection, the extent of problems encountered and impact during Covid is unknown.

How Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy needs of Travellers need to be addressed in the new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy

In order to overcome these challenges and to ensure that Travellers achieve the same literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills as their settled counterparts, the new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy needs to **clearly recognise and identify the substantial work necessary to**

achieve same outcomes for Traveller children in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills and **make this a priority.**

To achieve this, the strategy must

- clearly **recognise and address Anti-Traveller racism as a source** for low education and literacy numeracy and digital literacy outcomes for Traveller children,
- **address barriers and challenges** for Traveller children and their families in participating and progressing in education
- and provide a **holistic and comprehensive, targeted and whole-of-government approach** in order to bring Travellers up to a parity with regard to literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

The needs of Traveller children as well as the inclusion of children facing disadvantages need to be **mainstreamed throughout the strategy.** All chapters, be this ‘Supporting Teachers’ and Early Years Educators’ Professional Practice and Leadership’ or ‘Improving the Curriculum and the Learning Experience’ need to **clearly reference and target Traveller children’s needs** and the actions to be taken to meet these needs.

Lastly, the strategy needs to include **concrete Traveller-specific actions** that ensure Traveller children achieve full literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills and needs to **ensure their implementation.** Urgently needed here is the **targeted direction of resources** towards Traveller children and families, Traveller organisations supporting them and establishing HSCL Coordinators in all schools, DEIS and non-DEIS.

Recommended actions to be included in the Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy

- Develop and implement the **Traveller Education Strategy**, clearly addressing how to advance literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills of Traveller children, in 2023.
- Put in place **Traveller-specific education supports and resources**, which include funding for **Education Support and Policy Officers** in local, regional and national **Traveller organisations.**
- Provide **resources that follow the Traveller child** (not the school) and which are automatically applied and put in place where there is a Traveller child and provide the option for families to opt in and out as needed and as they wish.

- Improve **Traveller-specific supports for parents** to allow parents to support their children with homework and ensure that after-school clubs place additional emphasis on homework.
- Redress **educational disadvantages caused by Covid**.
- Address **inequities in accessing broadband and digital supports**.
- Eliminate **gaps for Travellers in accessing ELC and after school programmes**.
- Provide **targeted supports in second level** and ensure that Traveller students are supported across the lifetime of their education to improve retention in post-post primary education.
- Introduce **more DEIS schools** in areas where Travellers live.
- Install **HSCL Coordinators** in all schools, DEIS and non-DEIS.
- Enhance **protection for Travellers in relation to accommodation** to contribute to holistic benefits and fundamental life chances including in education.
- Ensure **holistic data collection by the DE / schools** at point of entry for Travellers to alert and remedy essential obstacles, and ensure the information is **made available to Traveller organisations**. The data collection must take into account **intersectional experiences**.
- Ensure **Traveller identity is positively visible, embedded in curriculum and in teaching practice** and part of school infrastructure and within narrative learning modules to encourage participation and learning and to create a sense of belonging.
- Embed foundational programme on **anti-racism and cultural competency within the Initial Teacher Education (ITE), which is then topped up by Continued Professional Development Courses (CPD)** on anti-racism. As per ongoing work and commitments, the NCCA will have elements of Traveller culture and history embedded in the curriculum. ITE should provide teachers with **sufficient cultural competency in order to deliver these components**, as advised by the NCCA advisory group.
- Empower **teachers to constructively challenge racism and identity-based bullying** and equip them with the language to do this, as it is vital that educators are given the opportunity to address unconscious bias, so that teaching practice does not intentionally or unintentionally exclude or discriminate.
- Introduction to **trauma, and the application of a trauma-informed approach** in the classroom, which recognises the trauma experienced by ethnic minorities, marginalised groups, refugees and asylum seekers, etc.
- Ensure **Traveller children are admitted to Irish classes**.
- Ensure **effective implementation of 'reduced timetable' guidelines and measures to prevent their disproportionate use** on Traveller children.
- Provide **accessible / NALA approved information** about early learning, care settings, primary and post-primary schools and the **administrative process thereof** using alternative forms of communication, such as video or audio, to accompany traditional information in

writing and ensure to meet the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs of Traveller parents.

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