



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Inquiry into Young People not in
Education, Employment or Training
(NEETs)**

21 April 2010

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Dolores Kelly (Chairperson)
Mr Peter Weir (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Paul Butler
Mr David McClarty
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Ms Marlene Rice) North Monaghan School Completion Programme

The Chairperson (Mrs D Kelly):

We now move to a briefing on the North Monaghan School Completion Programme, which will form part of the Committee's inquiry into young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs). I welcome Marlene Rice, who is the project co-ordinator. Marlene, I ask you to outline succinctly the key points in your paper for five or 10 minutes, after which Committee members will have an opportunity to comment on or ask questions about the programme.

Ms Marlene Rice (North Monaghan School Completion Programme):

Thank you very much for the opportunity to brief the Committee. I am the co-ordinator of the

North Monaghan School Completion Programme. The school completion programme (SCP) is a Department of Education and Science initiative that aims to have a positive impact on levels of pupil retention at primary and post-primary level and on the number of pupils who successfully complete the leaving certificate or equivalent. The SCP has been in existence since 2002, and 124 projects are in operation nationwide. A total of 464 primary schools and 227 post-primary schools are involved in the programme.

The main aims of the school completion programme are to retain young people in the formal education system until completion of the senior cycle or equivalent; to improve the quality of participation and educational attainment of targeted children and young people in the education process; to bring together all local stakeholders — the home, schools, the youth sector, and community, statutory and voluntary agencies — to tackle the problem of early school-leaving; to offer positive supports in the primary and post-primary sectors to help prevent educational disadvantage; to encourage young people who have left mainstream education to return to school to complete their exams at junior cycle, leaving certificate or equivalent; and to influence, in a positive way, any policies that relate to the prevention of early school-leaving in the education system.

We have identified some characteristics and barriers that are common to students who are at risk of early school-leaving. First, the issue of school attendance as far back as at primary school is important. Family circumstances have a huge impact, and, if the family has a history of early school-leaving, the child is more likely to do so. Little parental support or involvement with the education process is a factor, and, in many cases, we have found that that occurs owing to a lack of understanding of the education system. Students who display disruptive behaviour that is allied to poor motivation in class are at greater risk.

Other characteristics identified include low self-esteem; if a child becomes withdrawn; severe emotional, social or behavioural difficulties; and learning difficulties in basics such as literacy and numeracy, as identified by teacher observation, standardised assessment tests or educational psychological assessments. We also found students from a Traveller or Roma culture, and, increasingly, students from a foreign national culture, to be disadvantaged.

Students say that the main reason for their dropping out is a negative experience of school. Previous academic achievement has a strong bearing on early school-leaving. Early school-

leaving has its roots in early experiences of educational failure and academic struggle as far back as primary school. Allocating students to class according to their academic ability has negative consequences for those allocated to lower-stream classes, resulting in a climate of low expectations and negative student/teacher interaction, thereby promoting early school-leaving. The school climate, which is basically the quality of relations between teachers and students, is a key factor in school engagement and retention.

There is a need to identify as early as possible students who have learning difficulties and to put in place appropriate supports to foster their academic progress. A shift away from streaming to mixed-ability classes would have the potential to counter the low expectations and lack of academic challenge reported by students in lower-stream classes.

The school completion programme is based on a number of best-practice principles, the main one of which is partnership. Primary and post-primary schools, parents and relevant agencies collaborate formally through local management committees and informally through local coordinators. The programme is young person-centred. Each targeted young person who is at risk of early school-leaving has supports tailor-made to suit his or her personal and academic needs.

The programme is preventative. Young people who are at risk of early school-leaving are supported from an early age, in recognition of the fact that home, school, environmental, social and economic factors influence the patterns of early school-leaving. The programme is based on a bottom-up approach. A range of supports is offered in each cluster, or project area, depending on local needs, mindful of the fact that local factors are also important in influencing early school-leaving.

The young person's inclusion in the programme is based on an agreed set of criteria that target those most at risk of early school-leaving. A whole school approach can be used to minimise the potential for stigmatising those most at risk of early school-leaving. Supports are offered in and out of school, after school and during holidays, in recognition of the fact that continuous support must be given to such young people. The programme's primary aims are to break the pattern of early school-leaving and to tackle educational disadvantage.

Those who disengage from the education system can be tracked and monitored by the education welfare officer, who works closely with all schools and has records of early school-

leavers. The school completion co-ordinator tracks the attendance of targeted students and liaises with local agencies and families on the destination of school-leavers. An annual progress report that tracks targeted students and where they go is sent to the Department of Education and Science annually. The report includes the stage at which drop-out occurred.

The Chairperson:

Your paper is very helpful, Marlene, and covers many points. Members can speed-read it and pick out points from it. Perhaps you can pick out the key points.

Ms Rice:

One of the most useful elements of the SCP is attendance tracking and monitoring. We monitor the attendance of targeted students and liaise with principals and with students' parents on attendance. We increasingly find that issues in the home affect attendance. A psychologist on the programme liaises with parents. Moreover, we have integrated meetings with the education welfare officer and the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) at the school for students who pass 20 days' absence. Targets are set with students and parents to improve attendance.

Students who may drop out are offered one-to-one out-of-school tuition from a qualified teacher in the hope that they can sit at least five examinations at junior certificate, leaving certificate or equivalent. Homework clubs are another vital support, because in many cases parents do not have the skills to help their children at home. Demand for homework clubs has increased, especially from students from Traveller or foreign national cultures, because there is, obviously, a difficulty in understanding the language. The children are given a meal, which is funded by the Department of Social and Family Affairs. They receive two hours of supervised homework; that is, one hour of homework, followed by an hour of leisure activity, sport or art.

Another support that we find beneficial is parental programmes, whereby we identify parents whose children are at risk of early school-leaving. We offer them parenting programmes. Parents get the opportunity to meet other parents from a similar background to talk about problems and issues that they have. Parents find that a useful support.

The Chairperson:

Marlene, thank you very much. I apologise for having interrupted you.

You have painted a picture of a very holistic programme, which offers support for families. It leaves a legacy, in that once the child or young person finishes with you, support mechanisms are present for the next step forward. It is a very commendable programme. A number of Members have indicated that they want to ask questions.

Mr Butler:

Thank you, Marlene, for your presentation. Does the programme entail taking the children out of the classroom environment?

Ms Rice:

No. The students who have left school and dropped out of the education system have to be in education until the age of 16. Some of them, especially those from a Traveller background, typically leave school early and refuse to re-enter the school grounds. We set up a programme with the NEWB, whereby those students attend a local youth centre two or three days a week. Teachers go down there for a few hours and give them support with literacy and numeracy.

Mr Butler:

You mentioned the leaving certificate. How is the success of the programme measured?

Ms Rice:

The Department of Education and Science receives an annual progress report containing statistics on the number of students who have left school and successfully completed the junior certificate or leaving certificate examinations.

Mr Butler:

What do the statistics tell us about the programme? Is it successful?

Ms Rice:

I can speak only for my own sector. When I arrived, there was an 80% completion rate for the junior certificate, and that has now risen to 98%.

Mr Butler:

Has the South a strategy for dealing with NEETs?

Mrs Rice:

It has the delivering equality of opportunity in schools (DEIS) system, which takes an integrated approach. It provides for education welfare officers, home-school liaison officers and visiting teachers for Travellers. DEIS helps the Department identify and tackle the problem of students leaving school early.

Mr Butler:

That strategy deals only with post-primary schools.

Ms Rice:

Yes, but it ensures that students enter third-level education or its equivalent.

The Chairperson:

It may be helpful if, as Mr Butler asks, we knew more about the evaluation of the project. If you have presented any findings to your Department, perhaps you will send them to the Committee as further evidence. This is all very interesting.

Ms Rice:

Yes. That is no problem.

Mr Butler:

Thank you, Marlene.

Mr Weir:

Thank you, Marlene. Your presentation was very useful. I want to pick up on the issue of how success is measured. We need to find out what measure, or cocktail of measures, should be put in place to tackle the problem of early school-leaving in Northern Ireland. We must be realistic and keep in mind the limitation on resources, and consequently try to ensure that whatever measures are put in place are both affordable and produce good results for the investment.

It would be useful to obtain from the Department of Education and Science in the Republic any statistics that it has. Much of the school completion programme is focused on prevention. Prevention measures can tackle the problem and would prove very useful. Some of the evidence that we have heard or received concerns dealing with the situation that is created after the

problem has arisen. I have noticed that one of your objectives is, for want of a better word, to recapture young people who have left the school system and try to bring them back in. Statistics on how that objective evolved would be most useful.

I have only one question. You mentioned an acronym, which I cannot now recall, when you spoke about targeting young people who have left school early. One is in danger of acronym overload. Is the school completion programme universal across the country, or is it heavily targeted at areas of social deprivation and where there has been a problem with high drop-out rates?

Ms Rice:

It is specifically targeted at areas where there is a problem with early drop-out or a history of early school-leaving in the community. We also look at the number of students in the school who have access to medical cards. Provision is based on need. Schools with DEIS status — disadvantaged status — have the school completion programme.

Mr Weir:

It may be an unfair question to ask, because I do not know whether you have the statistics, but do you have a rough percentage figure for the number of schools that the programme covers in the Republic?

Ms Rice:

I do not know the answer to that. I can speak to Aidan Savage, the national co-ordinator, who will have that information.

Mr Weir:

It would be useful if you could supply that information to the Committee so that we know whether the programme covers the most disadvantaged 10%, 20%, or whatever.

Mr P Ramsey:

Marlene, you are very welcome. Your presentation contained a great deal of good detail. The Committee is conducting an inquiry into NEETs, but we are also examining models of good practice where, as Paul Butler rightly said, there is clear, qualitative evidence of measurable outcomes. Your figures are very interesting. You talked about concentrating on young people

who have literacy and numeracy problems. That is key, because those are barriers to the next stage, which is training or employment.

I want to ask about the joined-up, cross-departmental approach, because you referred to justice, health and education. Is there a formal link between you and other Departments to deal with the outputs of the school completion programme?

Ms Rice:

The SCP's board of management is made up of representatives from Dáil Committees. We work with them, because, at the end of the day, students at risk of early school-leaving will be those identified by, for example, the Justice Committee. The juvenile liaison officer deals with many of students that have been in trouble with the guards. Those students are then referred to us. An integrated approach is taken, in that we work together to identify students. The juvenile liaison officer deals with students who are as high risk as some of the students with whom I deal.

In the Republic of Ireland, there is a neighbourhood youth project that deals with students who are in trouble with the guards. The project offers programmes that cater to specific needs and address issues such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse and educational —

Mr P Ramsey:

Can it refer students to you?

Ms Rice:

Yes.

Mr P Ramsey:

Do you have a mentoring system in place?

Ms Rice:

Yes; there is a big brother/big sister programme.

The Chairperson:

In the kindest possible terms.

Mr Weir:

You do not lock them in a large house by any chance? [*Laughter.*]

Mr P Ramsey:

You also referred to the Traveller community and ethnic minorities, which is relevant. Is there any qualitative evidence that you have encouraged or stimulated students from those groups to remain in education or go on to further education? It would be useful to have that information if it is available.

Ms Rice:

The visiting teacher for Travellers in the Republic of Ireland works closely with me. The major barrier to travellers is literacy problems and, indeed, many of the students' parents are also illiterate. The Monaghan vocational education committee (VEC) increasingly targets members of the Traveller community and tries to offer adults programmes that will increase their literacy and numeracy. Parents' literacy and numeracy problems can be a barrier for students, because they cannot get any support at home, and parents are not able to read letters that are sent home, and so on. The literacy and numeracy problem is definitely a problem in the Traveller community.

Mr McClarty:

Marlene, that was an excellent presentation; I thoroughly enjoyed it. You are obviously working proactively to identify these young people. Do you have any figures on how successful you have been since the programme began in 2002? In your presentation, you mentioned that allocating students to classes according to their academic ability has negative consequences, particularly for those in the lower streams. However, if those same young people are allocated to classes in higher streams, is there not a possibility that they will struggle and feel a negative impact from that?

Ms Rice:

Many disadvantaged students feel that they are targeted and labelled as failures from an early age, before they even enter the education system. When students are placed in a lower-ability class, they feel that they have just been packed into a group, that it is expected that they will fail and that they will do so anyway. We are talking about students whose parents probably never entered third-level education and who have no awareness of third-level education. It is a case of raising the expectations of parents and students.

I understand that there is a need for early intervention to deal with students who have literacy and numeracy difficulties at primary level. As I said, if they were to go into a higher-band class, they might experience difficulties. However, by raising their expectations with the help of resource teachers and through further one-to-one assistance, there is the probability or possibility that they could succeed. It is about giving them the opportunity to do so.

Mr McClarty:

Do you have figures on the success of the programme over its eight years?

Ms Rice:

I will have to contact the Department to get the precise figures. My colleague who is responsible for research and development is off on maternity leave, so I was not able to access that information. The Department said that it would get back to me, so I will forward the figures to the Committee.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, Marlene. This has been inspiring, and I suspect that the Committee will want to include your evidence as part of its inquiry. I am almost tempted to open up the 11-plus debate, but we do not have time to do that today. Your findings on mixed streams are interesting, and I thank you for travelling to Lisburn for the meeting and for putting forward your informative paper. I look forward to hearing your response on the other matters, and the Committee Clerk will be in touch with you about that.

Ms Rice:

No problem. Thank you very much.