DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM SHAINCHEISTEANNA RÍTHÁBHACHTACHA A THÉANN I GCION AR AN LUCHT SIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

Déardaoin, 17 Iúil 2025

Thursday, 17 July 2025

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
John Connolly,	Malcolm Noonan,
Jen Cummins,*	Joe O'Reilly,
Dessie Ellis,	Anne Rabbitte.
Séamus McGrath,	
Naoise Ó Muirí,	
Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin,+	
Maurice Quinlivan.	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Deputy Pádraig Rice.

+ In éagmais le haghaidh cuid den choiste / In the absence for part of the meeting of Deputy Maurice Quinlivan.

Teachta / Deputy George Lawlor sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session at 12.41 p.m. and resumed in public session at 12.45 p.m.

Traveller Participation in Education: Department of Education and Youth

An Cathaoirleach: Apologies have been received from Deputy Rice. I ask members who are attending remotely to put their microphones on mute when not contributing so that we do not pick up any background noise or feedback. As usual, I ask all those in attendance to ensure their mobile phones are on silent or switched off. I will check my own now. Members attending remotely are reminded of their constitutional requirement that in order to participate in public meetings they must be physically present within the confines of the Leinster House complex.

As the witnesses are within the precincts of Leinster House, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentation they make to the committee. This means that they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything they say at the meeting. However, they are expected not to abuse this privilege, and it is my duty as Cathaoirleach to ensure that this privilege is not abused. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or entity outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

On the agenda for today's meeting is an engagement with the Department of Education and Youth to discuss the matter of funding for Traveller education and related matters. I invite Ms Cliodhna O'Neill, assistant secretary, to make the Department's opening statement, following which we will proceed with a question-and-answer session.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: I am the assistant secretary with responsibility for schools, social inclusion and youth affairs in the Department. On my left is my colleague Angela Bumster from our special education unit and Gráinne Cullen from our social inclusion unit. We are grateful for the invitation to attend today.

The meeting is very welcome and timely as we are in the process of finalising our second six-monthly progress report on the implementation of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030. The last time we appeared before the previous committee we had not yet published the Traveller and Roma strategy and we are pleased that we are making quick progress in that regard.

The strategy has actions for delivery by every level of our education system. It represents a whole-of-system approach to achieving equity of access, opportunity, and participation for Traveller children and young people and Roma children and young people. It is the result of extensive consultation with Traveller and Roma communities, education partners and stakeholders across government.

Since the launch of the Traveller and Roma education strategy last July, the Department has made strong progress on many of the actions set out in the first two-year implementation plan

to 2026. I am pleased to take this opportunity to share some of the key achievements delivered. These reflect our deep commitment to education that is inclusive, supportive and respectful of all cultures.

The approach we have taken in the reporting so far is to update on all actions and to expand on actions where there is an opportunity to do so, drawing from feedback, suggestions and new initiatives that come to light. It is a living, evolving document.

We have put in place strong governance and meaningful engagement structures to support the strategy's delivery. The Traveller and Roma education strategy oversight group, independently cochaired by Professor Ursula Kilkelly of UCC, has met twice this year and published its first progress report, with a second due shortly. The group will also oversee the implementation of the education-related actions from the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2024-2030, known as NTRIS.

The Traveller and Roma education forum was established in November 2024 and has met three times to date. The forum ensures that Traveller and Roma communities are active participants in shaping education policy, providing an essential platform for ongoing dialogue between the Department and the partners.

I will give a quick update on the Traveller and Roma education strategy associated actions. The two key developments in the early roll-out of the strategy are the appointment of two dedicated co-ordinators and the recruitment of 15 community link workers. The link workers will support Traveller and Roma families by building trust and addressing barriers to attendance, participation, and progression in education. They are based across 14 counties, including Dublin, Wexford, Galway, Roscommon, Cork, Clare, Longford, Limerick, Louth, Kerry, Westmeath, Mayo, Donegal, and Offaly. The recruitment process is well under way. We have strong progress in filling these important roles. The two new co-ordinators will support this work by establishing communities of practice by sharing best practice and helping resolve local and regional challenges.

A dedicated Tusla education support service team, TESS, comprises of a manager and two co-ordinators. This team will provide national leadership and help embed the strategy's actions in schools and communities across Ireland. As part of a new five-year national plan to improve school attendance, TESS is rolling out a pilot programme in 60 schools for the 2025-26 school year, which the Minister announced recently. This pilot uses an evidence-based model called Anseo. It is a multidimensional, multitiered system of supports. It helps schools identify and respond to attendance issues at three levels, whole-school, targeted and intensive. Schools taking part will get tailored support, training and in-school coaching from educational welfare officers. The aim is to develop long term, whole-school strategies that tackle the root causes of absences and absenteeism.

Reduced school days, RSDs, refer to a shortened school day where, by arrangement with school authorities, a student either arrives after the usual start time or leaves before the end of the day. It can also refer to a reduced week where a student does not attend all five days. The Department continues comprehensive monitoring of this. There have been two reports published to date with annual reports ongoing. These include data on the use of RSD for self-declared Traveller children and young people. The latest report, published in March 2025, was enhanced to include data by county, school and gender. This fulfils the previous programme for Government commitment to robust data collection, ensuring transparency and accountability in schools' use of reduced school days. Inspectors and NEPS psychologists now also raise the

issue of RSD proactively during visits supporting its use only when absolutely necessary and in the child's best interest. The briefing document that we provided contains information on a range of other measures that are being undertaken, including the review of well-being policy for our schools, well-being inspections by the Department's inspectorate and the development of online safety resources under the strategy.

The strategy also contains actions in relation to access to creativity and the arts. A total of seven schools are due to participate in the bringing live arts to students and teachers, BLAST, initiative. This is a Department led programme that supports creative residencies in schools with targeted engagement and outcomes for Traveller and Roma students. A formal evaluation of BLAST's impact is underway, which will inform future culturally responsive arts and engagement initiatives. Additionally, 26 schools are participating in the creative clusters two-year initiative, which fosters creative teaching and learning environments to support Traveller and Roma students.

The briefing document outlines measures to ensure accessible, targeted information for Traveller and Roma families. To date, this includes two videos, one on the strategy's publication to raise awareness and another on rights about reduced school days, with more resources of this type planned. The dedicated strategy website is regularly updated with consultation reports, progress updates and other key documents. Engagement with Traveller and Roma organisations on the redevelopment of the senior cycle, through the Traveller and Roma education forum, commenced this spring. The Department will continue to gather feedback to inform policy development in this area. A comprehensive report on inclusive education in initial teacher education has been completed by the Teaching Council. This highlights strong practice across higher education institutions. A national showcase is planned to share best practices in inclusive teaching. That will take place in September.

One of the key areas of progress I wish to highlight is the completion of a new video resource produced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA. This video, narrated by Dr. Hannagh McGinley, provides practical advice for primary and post-primary teachers on teaching Traveller culture and history in our schools. It includes examples of classroom practice and tips from teachers and school leaders, as well as reflections from Traveller students. This resource was published in July and further teaching materials based on the video are in development. This work is essential in promoting understanding, respect and pride in Traveller identity among all children.

The Department of Education and Youth is unwavering in its commitment to achieving equality in education outcomes, and to ensuring that Traveller and Roma children and young people are supported and valued in our schools. We recognise that much work remains. We will continue to work closely with Traveller and Roma communities and education partners to implement the Traveller and Roma education strategy fully and in a spirit of partnership. I thank the committee for the opportunity to meet today. We look forward to the questions. We hope to use this engagement to inform our ongoing efforts to build an inclusive, respectful and supportive education system for every Traveller and Roma child and young person.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Ms O'Neill for her comprehensive opening statement.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank Ms O'Neill for her presentation. A few areas were discussed. She referenced that two co-ordinators have been appointed and 15 link workers. How does that work? Are they being put into different areas? What way is that being approached?

On the issue of school inspectors, we have a problem with inspectors in normal schools. We do not seem to have proper inspections. I am not sure what way this is going to work for the Traveller and Roma communities. Will these co-ordinators and link workers be part of monitoring attendance?

I am a bit worried about the meals for students going to DEIS schools. This leads to their education. If they go there hungry, they are not tuned in. There is terrible uncertainty all the time about this. I am told there is further uncertainty coming up next year. They tried to stop them in Ballymun. They extended them until the end of this year, but next year we are told that may be a different story. It is slightly outside what the witnesses are presenting on, but it is still tied into education because it is important that young kids are properly nourished before they start school.

I am curious about monitoring the issue of suicide and teaching young kids about this. What way is that being co-ordinated? How do we get this message across? The suicide rate is high in the Traveller community. Unfortunately, even some young Travellers have been caught up in this.

The video for the teachers about how they should be able to deal with different issues is good. That is worthwhile because there are so many different issues. I am curious about the social workers in schools. On top of the other issues that Ms O'Neill referenced, are we up to speed in each school with social workers? Are there enough to deal with the issues that are arising?

It is important in the video that the teachers can see how the culture works, have ideas on how to tackle different issues relating to the Traveller community and to understand the culture and what is going on. There are not huge numbers of the Roma community in different areas. We might only have a few in different schools. I am not sure how effective that is. There are small numbers in Finglas and Ballymun, but it is very small compared to other areas. Can Ms O'Neill provide us with some insights on the issues?

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: I will start and bring in my expert colleagues as we go along. I will hit off a couple of the Deputy's points. On the co-ordinators and link workers, we have the two co-ordinators in post relatively recently and the link workers are still being recruited. The plan is that those co-ordinators will co-ordinate in two parts of the country. I listed the areas where the link workers will be placed. The plan is that they will be rooted in the community and be a complement to the existing services. They will work with the education welfare officers, home-school liaison officers, schools, Traveller and Roma community, youth organisations, etc. There will be a vital link in the system for children, young people, and their facilities. It is a new role. We have had some experience of that through the Supporting Travellers and Roma, STAR, programme and it is modelled on what we have seen working already. We will be iterating that to make sure it is most effective and we will be trialling different things in different areas as well to see what becomes most effective.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: I thank the Deputy for the question on the link workers. When we did the consultation on the strategy, we had a lot of feedback from the people in the regions where there are high Traveller and Roma enrolments in our schools regarding the supports available to those children. STAR was a five-year pilot project supporting Traveller and Roma in our schools. It had a number of extensions because of the Covid-19 pandemic and we have a very comprehensive evaluation done of that work. It created STAR teams in four different regions. As Ms O'Neill said, it is about linking up some of the services already in place and then bring-

ing in extra, targeted resources as necessary, namely, our education welfare officers, school completion programme people and home school community liaison people. There were education workers within that STAR pilot project and some of the learning from the piece was around the barriers to some of the work they were doing in terms of the link to the school and making sure those workers, when we put them in place, are able to really integrate and work with the people in the schools and all the services already there. Out of the consultation work the idea of community link workers was established. We also had an OECD review of our DEIS programme, which is our key policy for addressing education disadvantage. Across Europe there are cultural liaison officers. We decided to call them community link workers to make things a little simpler. They will work within our school completion programme structure and therefore will have the benefit of working with those other services.

The Deputy asked about attendance. It is actually a key focus for us as a Department following the Covid-19 pandemic and the changes in the attendance patterns generally. We see in our attendance figures that Traveller and Roma children are more affected, which we know through our DEIS programme. The DEIS schools show greater challenges in attendance post-Covid than mainstream schools. The idea is that these link workers will be an integral part of that network of people in these regions. They will work with a focus on attendance but also on participation, engagement, and the link into the school and school culture in terms of diversity and inclusion and making sure the learnings we have from the STAR pilot, which were very positive, are carried through. It is like we are scaling the pilot out into a wider number of areas.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: The Deputy had a query on school inspectors. The inspectorate, which is statutorily independent, has a significant programme of inspection it rolls our across our schools on an annual basis. At different times the inspectors have thematic inspections as well as the types of inspections we are all familiar with such as whole-school inspection or a subject inspection. They also have thematic inspections on, for example, well-being. They do those and then publish composite reports in those areas. As part of the strategy we have linked in with the inspectors to ensure there is significant focus on Traveller and Roma attendance and teaching and learning and ensuring Traveller and Roma children and young people are part of that inspection. Now when the inspectorate does an inspection in schools they speak to the whole school community. They have a very strong mechanism for engagement with the student population and with parents as well as other members of the school community. We have been engaging with them in respect of that. That programme of inspection has commenced and will roll out further over the coming period. That is an important element to the strategy.

The Deputy had a query regarding school meals. The school meals programme is run by the Department of Social Protection with funding given out to schools. That is now a universal programme for primary schools. My understanding is the final tranche of schools are joining up and schools were invited to apply for that if they were not already in receipt of it. The question may have been around breakfast clubs and that area.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Yes.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: There are a number of different sources of funding but the main one is through the school completion programme, SCP, which comes under TUSLA education support services, TESS, and my own division. There has been a significant increase in the funding and the availability because we have put additional funding into that space. We are very conscious of the need for those breakfast clubs. The direction from the Department through TESS to those SCPs is to prioritise in that space.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I know it was not the witness's Department. I was highlighting the fact it would impact on people's education. That is all I was doing and also highlighting that there is a threat to that funding.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: The SCP funding, like everything, is subject to budgetary negotiation but certainly it is a key priority for the Minister with regard to social inclusion and it is our intention, budget considerations notwithstanding, to continue to provide funding in respect of the school completion programme and to allow those programmes continue with the very important breakfast clubs and other initiatives. There is a lot of autonomy at local level for those programmes to determine what the funding will be spent on, but it is certainly our intention to continue that.

The Deputy had a query regarding mental health supports and the teaching in that space. None of us here are curricular experts, but we know from out colleagues on the curriculum side that there has been particular emphasis in the social, personal and health education, SPHE, programmes in respect of awareness and support in that space and within the whole school framework. I mentioned the well-being framework. The entire approach for a school in creating and nurturing a supportive environment though the well-being framework is one of the things the inspectorate looks at. There has been an immense amount of support and focus on that over previous years. Again, we are very conscious of that through the strategies. With the Traveller forum, one of the things we will be doing, some of which we have already done, is ensuring our colleagues at the National Education Psychological Service, NEPS, is working very closely with the Traveller forum to make sure the well-being approach is well understood and that Traveller culture and identity informs practice in schools in that space.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: When critical incidents do occur within a school, NEPS is one of our front-line responders in providing support for the school community, children and families, and everyone connected to the school. We invited the NEPS critical incident team to address the forum. The forum is quite a large group of Traveller and Roma representative organisations and representatives from the local and regional projects. The idea is to workshop the various policies of the Department from the perspective of the participants - in this case that is the representatives from the Traveller and Roma communities - to ensure the NEPS response is appropriate because it can be different within Traveller communities when there is a critical incident or a suicide.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: The Deputy referenced video resources for teachers. I thank him for acknowledging that. It was a very strong piece of work by our colleagues on the national council. Thanks again to Dr. McGinley. It was referenced that it should be important to see how the culture is portrayed in that and in other materials. There will be ongoing development of those kinds of materials. It is understood how important the visual representation of culture is. We recently had an event to mark the STAR project and the evaluation that Ms Cullen referred to. We saw how well the young people responded to a really strong representation of culture. There was great feedback from that event about how much it meant to come in to the clock tower in the Department of education and see the work, art and artefacts the young people had produced on display in that way. We have certainly taken that to heart in the design of the documentation and so on. We have very received very strong feedback from the community in respect of that.

On the query in relation to social workers in schools, the primary presence of Tusla in the education system is through the Tusla education support service, TESS, and the warranted officers are the educational welfare officers who have responsibility for attendance and so on. My

understanding is that a child can be referred to social work in Tusla when there is a significant concern about that child. There is a strong connection between the educational support service in TESS and the child welfare section of Tusla because they are colleagues in the same organisation. The primary focus within the school system is on attendance and well-being in the school. If there are further issues which warrant the involvement of a social worker, a school can make a referral to the educational welfare service and that will be picked up on the welfare side within Tusla.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I welcome the witnesses and thank them for the presentation. A lot of the questions I had were probably addressed in the response to Deputy Ellis. There is an overarching issue with the cross-collaborative approach, not just from the Department of education. The big challenge from my experience with Traveller families in my own community is that with issues like housing, intergenerational unemployment and lots of others Traveller families experience, any of these individual barriers can be insurmountable to a family and take a child out of the education system at a very early stage. What I have found frustrating is sometimes, programmes are very inconsistent. Initiatives are started and programmes are set up on Traveller education. These run, then stop and are then started again or they are not funded again. That momentum that should be driving a much more co-ordinated approach is lost. Sometimes, there is not even adequate funding for youth work, which can have a really detrimental effect on whether young Traveller boys and girls stay in secondary school, in particular. That is a real concern.

Does the forum have a wider input into other Departments in terms of its ability to influence and shape budgets and recognises the real and significant challenges that Traveller young people face in their daily lives, one of which is living in poor conditions? At Traveller Pride in Kilkenny, I was very fortunate to meet a fantastic young man who is now in third level. It is such a rare occurrence, however. He is fantastic and going on to great things. What we would love to see is not just Traveller boys and girls staying on to complete their leaving certificate cycle but actually going on to third level or doing apprenticeships. I know there is a Traveller apprenticeship programme. My first question is really about joined-up thinking and programmes at a local level where there are local Traveller inclusion strategies but sometimes the programmes are dropped or there is a funding inconsistency or gap that fails to recognise the need to continue them.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: I thank the Senator. One of the drivers behind the first education strategy is exactly as he outlined. The driver is the idea that we have had a lot of things that have started and stopped over the years. There was not a sustained effort in terms of that co-ordination. That has driven a lot of the work we have done over the last two years to get to the point of publication. Establishing these structures, with the two national co-ordinators, and building that team within TESS to drive the implementation of this strategy is a step in the right direction, we hope, to bring together all of the different players and the learning from those really good things that have happened on the ground and finding ways, through the strategy, to encourage those and link them in. There is a piece in there around communities of practice and shared learning.

On the higher policy end of things and the linking to the other services and challenges for the Traveller and Roma community, that sits within the co-ordination of the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy, NTRIS, which is under the Department of children. That brings all of the pieces together. We bring our education piece to the table but we will always look at it from the perspective of putting the child at the centre and determining what are the challenges

for that child. You then start to build out those collaborative processes and the collaboration between the different Departments and agencies. That is the ambition. We have a six-year strategy. Within that, there are two-year implementation plans. The first two are already one year in and all of the seeds of that work have been planted. It is not new work but it is building on the huge amount of work that had already been done.

The forum itself is our education forum. That is about the Department also trying to look at whether we are integrating our services properly on the ground as well and whether our policies informed by the needs of the Traveller and Roma communities. Does that answer the Senator's questions?

Senator Malcolm Noonan: It answers my questions very well. I thank Ms Cullen. I welcome the comments about integrating Traveller culture and education into the system for all pupils. Later in the year, the committee will have a session with the Heritage Council, which is in the process of finalising a Traveller heritage strategy. We look forward to that session later on in the year. Cultural integration of Traveller identity within the curriculum is really important. Does Ms Cullen have a view on that and how that can be better integrated into the educational curriculum?

Ms Gráinne Cullen: There are probably about three different strands to that, as I see it. There is the initial teacher education piece and then there is the teacher professional learning, when someone is in service, and there is then the curriculum itself. We are going at that at all three levels. In terms of initial teacher education, the Teaching Council has done a review of its Céim, which is its standards for initial teacher education. A core element of that is on diversity and inclusion. It has a number of examples of higher education institutions which are leading out. There is one called Tobar. I am not sure if the Senator is familiar with it.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I have heard of it, yes.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: I think Mary Immaculate College and Trinity College do that one. There are really good examples of where Traveller history and culture is looked at in the curriculum for initial teacher education, ITE, for student teachers.

The second layer is teacher professional learning. Throughout the consultations, we constantly heard calls for the development of a resource for teachers. At NTRIS level, it is a resource that would probably be used widely by any person working with the Traveller and Roma communities. This year, we have negotiated with our support service, which is called Oide. I do now know if the Senator is familiar with the education support services but they all came together under one body, Oide, recently. It develops the curriculum for those continuing professional development, CPD, pieces and builds on all the resources that are already in the system. A lot of work has been done at University College Cork and there is work being done in the University of Galway. There is a myriad of materials. Oide will pull those together and we will develop out that as a resource and offering for our teacher professional learning. I am delighted personally about that because it could make a huge difference in our system to the culture in our schools and so on. They are the two big pieces and, as Ms O'Neill said, it is around diversity and inclusion within the curriculum in our schools.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Do I have time for one more question?

An Cathaoirleach: Yes.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: My final question refers to the connection with the early child-

hood sector and early childhood education. Does the Department have a view on Traveller-specific preschools - there are some - or integration? It is a hugely important area of the welfare and development of any young person. From a Traveller perspective, it is vital we begin in those formative early years and it can lead them onto a path of staying in education. It is around the connection. I am sure the forum looked at this. Some of the projects may have had on-site specific Traveller preschools and in many cases, it is about trying to encourage Traveller families to participate in preschool education.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: The strategy involved the three Departments together, which is new ground in many ways, because transition is important. While the policy of the other Department is its policy, we work closely with our colleagues in early years. The forum had a session on the current work the early years section is doing on the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme and the other provision. The numbers coming through at junior infants are here somewhere. We have a measure of the children who are coming from ECCE into junior infants and there are fewer Traveller children. The Senator is familiar with that. The problem is that they are then coming in already at a disadvantage as regards their development. However, parental choice is always important too and while our policy is very much focused on inclusion and moving away from segregated provision, if the parental choice is such that it means a child can participate in the ECCE scheme or the on-site provision, is that better for a number of years, as we move forward or should we tackle it? Our policy is inclusion with peers in a setting that will be mirrored as they go through primary and post-primary school and life.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: The reason I ask is that is exactly my thinking on it. In many cases it is easier for families if the facility is on site to bring a child into a specific project. Sometimes it is as simple as that. Although the ideal would be full integration into preschools, if there are opportunities, they may be worth considering. As I said, I have seen both models in action and I have seen it work well on site. However, that project was stopped. It goes back to a previous point I made. Sometimes they are discontinued and it is worth giving consideration to it.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Yes. Ms O'Neill has just handed me this. Action 3.1.1 in the strategy is about family link workers in the early years. It would be about working across the families and encouraging participation.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank the Cathaoirleach for letting me sit in for Deputy Rice, who is normally on the committee. I am not. I am just covering for him today. A little background about me is that I was a school completion co-ordinator for 18 years and my doctoral research was about trauma and early school leaving. I have worked with a lot of children and young people from the Traveller community throughout my career.

One of the things I am concerned about is reduced school days. I was looking at the data in the report that came out in February. There is a large percentage of children from the Traveller community, as compared with children from the settled community, who are on reduced school timetables, as they used to be called. I apologise for the old lingo. I am concerned about that. I recently visited Ballyfermot Travellers Action Programme, where it was expressed to me how difficult it is for children who are going to primary and secondary school when they are in for an hour. There is nothing less motivating for a child than to get up and get ready to go to school for an hour and then come home. It should not be allowed in these circumstances. We must try harder.

It is not just Traveller children. There are other children in special schools and mainstream

schools to whom this is happening. It prevents children from having an education. I am concerned about the numbers for children in primary schools. They are small numbers, but in comparison with others they are not. It is 0.36% of Traveller children and 0.11% of all children. It is higher in secondary school and it is concerning considering how few Travellers complete the leaving certificate or equivalent. I am concerned about that.

I was also concerned that when I visited that project I was told the support of the educational welfare service, which I worked closely with in my project in Ballymun, is not there. The number of supports that are needed are not there. This is echoed throughout the country.

I am not sure how much time I have.

An Cathaoirleach: It is okay.

Deputy Jen Cummins: It works differently in different committees. Should I speak fast or slow?

I was delighted to see in the briefing document that Traveller culture will be discussed and learned about in schools. That is important. It was one of the points raised in my research by a young person who said she would love to see that in school because it had been difficult for her to even say she was from the Traveller community. When she did, people did not understand her and she really wanted to have that in her school, so I am delighted to see that.

A point was raised earlier about educational welfare officers, EWOs, and social workers working closely. They do, but the referral has to be separate. They are two different referrals and I want that to be clear. They work on the same team, but if the referrals are not made separately, an educational welfare officer cannot and will not go to a social worker and *vice versa* to ask whether the other has heard about Mary or John. They do not and cannot do that under many different regulations. The referrals have to be made. From working in school completion for a long time, I always say we need to refer many young people who are not in attendance. After 20 days is one thing, but there are many young people for whom attendance is an issue. When attendance is an issue, participation and learning is difficult and we find that literacy levels for children who miss a lot of days of school mean that when they get to secondary school they cannot understand what is going on. The problem is that they will then not be able to complete first and second year and therefore they will be gone.

Reduced timetables is the angle I am coming from, but there are different reasons people do not attend. Will the witnesses give me an update? I know what the plan is, but specifically, how will we work with reduced timetables and other attendance initiatives?

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: The Deputy heard the Minister in the education committee not so long ago discuss the Anseo initiative and broader attendance. I will speak briefly about that and then hand over to my colleague, Ms Bumster, about the reduced school days.

For the committee's benefit, the Minister announced a few months ago a significant focus on attendance across the board. We are conscious, as Ms Cullen said earlier, since the Covid-19 pandemic of the need to ensure attendance improves across our schools. That is universal. A whole swathe of initiatives has been put in place. The Deputy referenced the EWOs. It is worth noting the huge and considerable investment that has gone into additional educational welfare officers in recent years. We have almost doubled the number of EWOs. I would have to check the exact figure. There has been a major focus on ensuring that children have school places and that attendance recovers from the level during the post-Covid phase. With regard to

the new initiatives, in addition to providing the new EWOs, a national campaign on attendance across the board is being developed. We will be engaging specifically with the Traveller and Roma communities as part of that campaign and to ensure the materials being used are being disseminated and supported among those communities. There will be a very specific focus in that regard.

The Anseo initiative will be rolled out in a certain number of schools, the initial target being 60 schools. A large number of schools sought to be involved. We are considering how we can make the initiative available to more schools. It allows schools to examine their data, determine the patterns, get behind those and put in place effective strategies.

We also do other things in this space, including funding the partnership schools initiative with the National Parents Council, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals and the Irish Primary Principals' Network to support schools to come up with strategies that involve parents and students so as to meet the target.

I could not agree more on referrals. If a child is approaching the 20-day threshold that requires reporting to TESS, it does not spark a referral, so it is really important that the school tackle the issue with the child, family and so on. It is only if such measures are not working that the option of referral to TESS is important. As the Deputy said, this is separate from a social worker referral.

Ms Bumster will talk about the reduced school day, which we also consider to be an incredibly important issue.

Ms Angela Bumster: I will give the Ladybird version of the reduced school day for the benefit of those who do not have the Deputy's vast experience of our sector. The reduced school day, or RSD as we know it, is a transitionary arrangement that should be put in place only in exceptional, very limited and time-bound circumstances, and only with the consent of the parent or guardian of the child. It is designed to help a student to attend for some part of the school day along with his or her peers when it is not possible to attend in a full-time capacity. If used appropriately, the reduced school day can be a positive intervention with the intention of assisting a student to return to full-time attendance. For example, it can be to support a child returning to school after a long period of absence or school refusal, or support a child who, due to a medical condition, is just not able to stay at school for a full day. It is also based on the individual needs of the student.

The number of children on a reduced school day in the last year was 1,275, or 13% of the student population. This represented an increase of 22%, from 1,044, on the proportion of the previous year, which represented 11% of the student population. The main reason for the increase was improved reporting by the schools. Tusla did considerable work on letting schools know the requirements and guidelines. We had increased reporting, but there was also an increase in anxiety among kids. We are seeing a lot of school refusal. The main reasons that Tusla reports to me have been indicated on the forms relate to children transitioning from primary to post-primary level, school refusal, chronic absenteeism, medical issues, mental health issues, and dysregulation or stress in a school situation, meaning the child is just not able to manage a full school day. A plan is put in place with the school and the parent to increase attendance incrementally. In an ideal world, a child would be back within six weeks. If a child is not back within six weeks, the school has to go into the portal and notify the authorities again. That is an aspect that was missing in the previous reports. Tusla has really hammered that home with the schools to remind them they have to report again after six weeks. This is why our reports show

the numbers of second, third and fourth instances have increased. I suspect they probably did not increase on the ground but that the reporting is getting better.

We admit that we have a bit to do on the reports. We have three reports published at this stage and we can see from them that we do not have very pure information on the reasons for reduced school days. The portal where the school keys in the information has a text box and it is difficult to pull out valuable data from that. From September, we are changing the portal so there will be a drop-down box. At least we will then be able to categorise the reasons. I hope I will be able to come back to the members in a year or other period to give them more information on the reasons. They are difficult to capture at the minute.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The reduced timetable for medical reasons is excellent. I know of a child who had a very serious injury when she was very small. She benefited from the reduced timetable, which was great because she would not have been able to manage otherwise. This part is really important but I am hearing that the initiative is being used for behaviour management. I realise reporting involves a drop-down box but I would love to hear more about what inspections indicate the initiative is being used for exactly. For the very few who need it, I suppose it is important. Coming from my background, I am always focusing on the very few, not the many, because it is the very few who will fall through the cracks of all the supports we are trying to give. Unfortunately, this happens.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: To be very clear, the Department absolutely does not support the type of use alluded to. As Ms Bumster has said, a clear message in this regard has gone to schools from TESS. The practice of Ms Bumster, colleagues and the inspectorate is informed by information we get in this space, so we proactively remind schools if we see a pattern that is not reflective of appropriate use. We are very keen to ensure that we follow up on this, that the purpose of reduced school days is clearly understood and that they should not be used in the manner implied. We will continue to take the matter very seriously. The data we have will inform our practice and also help to inform the inspectorate. We have a programme within the Department, namely, the school improvement programme. There are certain markers, and what has been referred to is certainly one of them. We will be taking this very seriously.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I apologise for being late for the start of the meeting. I was in the Dáil speaking but I read the opening statement before the meeting. I have a few questions on it.

The issue I am concerned about is not one on which I am speaking off the top of my head. I spoke about it to several teachers and others in education across Limerick, particularly in the past couple of weeks, because I knew the topic was coming up. It is an issue we have not addressed properly for a couple of years and I am not sure where the blame lies for that. Do we want to use the word "blame" at all? My concern is children who do not go to school, especially children from the Traveller community. They might go one day a week or might not go at all. The dropout rate is very high. There are many good schemes in place but they are not delivering the outcomes we would prefer to see. I do not believe we are having a dramatic impact on ensuring children go to and stay in school. What is the first thing the witnesses believe we should do to ensure that we reduce the number of Traveller children who do not go to school regularly?

Ms Gráinne Cullen: The work we are trying to do in this regard is to bring about change over a sustained period with targeted resources. While there are many resources that are universal in schools, there is also the DEIS programme. The proportion of Traveller children in

the DEIS programme is much higher than that of the general population. The proportion of the general population is 25% and that of the Traveller population is 63%. Travellers will benefit from the schemes and resources within the DEIS programme. I am referring to targeting through the strategy and its implementation plan. One thing to outline has to do with the numbers transferring and the numbers in our schools, including enrolments, which comprise our main method of knowing how many children are in our schools, and what we call the retention rate. On the transfer between primary and post-primary school in post-Covid times, we have high enrolment in our primary schools, but the transfer between sixth class and first year is often where the weakness occurs. For Traveller children prior to Covid, between 95% and 98% were moving from sixth class into first year. The national average was 99%, so it was very close. The post-Covid number has dropped for everyone. It is 95.6% for the general population, but there is a bigger drop for Traveller children to 82%.

There is also the retention of numbers to third year. I am trying to outline the pattern, but leaving school at the age of 16 has always been a marker in respect of these communities. The number of Travellers who are retained to, or go into, third year is 91.6%. They are there and are staying to third year. It drops to 78.3% when we look at how many actually sit the junior certificate, but that has increased by 16% over the past seven years. I am trying to look at the targets and so on for the strategy. If we look back six years and then try to look forward six years, what will we try to do over that period? Where our really big drop is, and what everybody in this room and everybody in the room previously is very aware of, is in the number of Traveller children who stay and sit the leaving certificate, which is down to 26.5%. When we develop the strategy and listen to all of the partners around the table and all of the communities, that is where the focus needs to be.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I will go back to the question of what the most important thing is we should do to make sure Traveller children go to school as regularly as the general population goes to school. For instance, are there any plans to target parental support and change the attitudes of parents, which is the big thing we are missing here? That is the biggest issue we face. We can throw all the money we want at it and have all the schemes but still have that issue. In my constituency of Limerick, a huge number of Traveller children are still not going to school. They are on holidays at the moment but when we sit here normally, they are not at school.

That question is about parents and what we can do to talk to parents. I know some of the schools. It is very unfair of us to leave it to the school service on its own. It does not have the resources or supports. Schools I have been dealing with are doing the best they can. They have fantastic staff who are dedicated beyond belief in what they are trying to do, but they do not have the resources. Unless we engage the parents, we are on a hiding to nothing. How do we break that cycle?

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: Among the key markers for success in school and retention to the end are enrolment, regular attendance and engagement of the student. Is it interesting? Is there good teaching and learning? Is the student welcome? Is the school a nurturing environment? Is it somewhere the student feels a part of?

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I understand that, but it is back to the parent. How do we get to the parent?

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: I will come to the parent in a second. Part of what the entire strategy is trying to do is make sure that the child wants to be there. We understand from our consulta-

tion with children and young people, as well as parents, that has quite an influence. If a child is agitating to go, he or she is more likely to be brought to school compared to if he or she is not that bothered. We think that is a very important part of it.

As the Deputy said, family, parental and community attitude is also very important. There are a couple of things in that regard. Through the forum and engagement with the Traveller and Roma communities, they are giving us a lot of feedback about what does and does not work. The community link workers have a very important role. We are keen to see what benefit that brings in respect of working directly with parents, understanding the importance of education and making that clear. The strategy has a role to link in with families at a very early stage because a good attendance pattern from early years can carry right through. That is not specific to the Traveller community; that is everybody. A child who attends regularly in the first weeks of junior infants is much more likely to continue to have good attendance than a child who does not, across the board. It is about trying to engage that piece. As part of the strategy, and exactly as the Deputy said, there is the piece about the school as a welcoming environment, there is the child and then there is the role of the parent. There are a lot of actions for us in that space.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: This has come up. It is part of the story. We often say that we can manage that piece of getting them into school, but it is about how we get them in. One of the big learnings from the STAR pilot project was the involvement of parents, exactly as the Deputy said. Some of that is around the confidence of a parent to be able to engage with the school. Sometimes, it is around the practice of the school, where everything is done in the school but maybe the parent had a really bad experience in his or her own school life. It is about how we build the confidence of those parents to do that. That is done through the local partnership groups and the projects working with the schools. That link worker element we talked about is huge in that regard.

It is also about the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and its element of the strategy in terms of literacy levels. Sometimes, some of the engagement can be very difficult because it is done in the school in a particular format or way that maybe does not work for parents who have low literacy levels. Investment in adult literacy at the further and higher education end of things is very important, as is some targeted work there in respect of Traveller parents.

On linking out to the communities, the Deputy put his finger on something that is covered in the evaluation from STAR and that we need to dig into more. A huge piece of work has been done in the STAR evaluation that we have only just started to really engage with as regards this plan and our work with the new teams. There is definitely that element of the school connecting into the community. We also get the feedback that the Deputy is getting from leaders and teachers in our school system. There are a lot of things in the community but it is about how we make sure people are linking up to those. There are supports other than everything falling on the principal, the teacher, the SNA or whoever it is within the school system. We have a lot of work to do but we hope we-----

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: My time will probably be up shortly. The key for this has to be how we get parents to interact with schools. We have lost a generation and the generation before that, some of whom are still alive. How do we interact with them to explain how important it is for their children to go to school? The only way we can get many them out of poverty is if they get the education we are looking for. That is the job of work that needs to be done. I do not want to sit here at the end of this committee in four years' time with no progress made whatsoever.

Do we have any idea of how many children were on reduced school days before the school recess?

Ms Angela Bumster: Sorry, Deputy. I do not have a definite number but I know the numbers have gone up.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Will the Department come back to us on that?

Ms Angela Bumster: We will not have the full data until the autumn, when we will be doing up the report for the 2024-25 year.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Does the Department have that data on a weekly basis?

Ms Angela Bumster: No, we do not get it on a weekly basis.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: It does not know how many people are not going to school.

Ms Angela Bumster: No. Some schools do not put the figures in in a very timely fashion. That is the problem. They are putting them in at the end of the school term. That is not allowed under the guidelines but TESS is trying to work with schools to ensure they increase their reporting. If it is in contact with schools, or an education welfare officer, EWO, happens to be in a school with a case, they are reminding them that they need to put these on the portal, so they are coming in. The data is probably available in tests at the minute but before I publish it, I have to verify it and do a bit of manipulation to calculate it out so that it is in a proper format to publish.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Do we have any idea of the percentage of Traveller children on this?

Ms Angela Bumster: No, I do not. However, I have figures here from last year for Traveller children. We had 87 Traveller children, of the 1,275. That was a decrease of ten from the previous year, which was 97.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Okay, so it is 87 out of 1,275.

Ms Angela Bumster: Yes, 6.8% of all reduced school day, RSD, cases belonged to the Traveller and Roma community.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: I have two things to add. One of the levers we have is to make it clear to TESS that this is one of the strategic priorities and that schools need to be reminded of this. We can put out another reminder through the school system to try to improve reporting where that is an issue. The other thing, and this comes down to the disaggregated data, is that children and young people who are listed as Travellers on the system are self-declared. We know that some of them do not want to do that and that is their right. The data always comes with that caveat.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: To finish, I want to emphasise that we have to get parental buy-in on this and we have to look at some projects to do that. If projects are there at the moment, they are not working as successfully as we wish. We are going to be here again for years with the same problem unless we address the issue of parental involvement.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: The witnesses are very welcome this afternoon. I apologise that I was late coming in. I have a huge interest in this area. I requested that they come before us and I thank the Chair and the clerk for organising it.

I am listening to the contributions and I have briefly gone over the documents. However, I cannot sit back and wonder why my request was not initiated on the first day ever. This is important for me to share with the committee. One reason I requested the Department come before us is that I happened to be in Ballinasloe recently with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. We were at a youth diversion programme meeting with youth workers in the area. A really sad story was shared with me and with all of us who were there. It was about how difficult it is for children from the Traveller community to access education. They told me that three children had failed to access education up to the age of seven and a half. School after school refused. It was not the child's refusal but the school's refusal. The youth workers were following that child's experience, and that child transitioned to secondary school until October, in Ballinasloe. Why did the child not survive even until the junior certificate? Schools become amalgamated. I am looking through certain items in the document. Amalgamation is how all-girls schools or all-boys schools come together. They had a policy that the youth worker could no longer support a child if they found themselves on that one card. Actually, you do not do that. I am the mother of three so I know exactly how the first years go on. None of them are perfect. Actually, it was a case of "one strike and you are out". That child was out of the newly amalgamated school in Ballinasloe in October of first year. That child was out of education from there on. There was no support because the school chose that the youth diversion group could not support the child within. The child went into education at the age of seven and a half and was out of it by 13. That is normal and a regular occurrence. After Darndale, Ballinasloe is the second most deprived area in the country. If that is how we are treating our most vulnerable, I do not think we have a chance.

I am going back over the documents, scanning certain words. Amalgamations are one issue, as are school refusals by the schools, and feuds. If families are fighting, some families are more intimidated about going to school. It is a huge issue for Tusla. It will acknowledge that. I do not see it in this document. I hope to hear that in the Department's dropdown menu, feuds is an issue. Children are not going to school because families are fighting and because of social media and the calling-out of it. Covid-19 had a huge impact on everything else, but children want to be in school because it is what they are supported to do. That is why we have the early childhood care and education, ECCE scheme, in order to teach the process to get them into the system. That is why the Department of children, with the HSE, supports the scheme. Where children are identified as at risk or as a vulnerability, there is a package for X number of weeks to help them transition, with that piece of regularity. What piece is there in junior infants? Ms O'Neill alluded to that. That settling-in period is really important. What is the settling-in period for that child in junior infants or senior infants? In the same way, what is the settling-in policy in first year? Not all children transition well. A child going from a small rural school, not necessarily from any particular background, could struggle with first year. They might go from a school of 70 or 100 kids to one with 1,000 kids. In the case of Athenry, there are 1,000 kids in the school. Some kids do not transition well.

I have concerns as to how the Department is working collaboratively with Tusla where we are finding feuds. They are a big issue now in the community, with the calling-out on social media. Also, how is it working as regards cases where a child gets five years of education and that is it done?

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: It is terrible to hear when a child has an experience like that. That is not the experience we want any child to have. It is what we are trying to prevent by having this comprehensive strategy. That absolutely should not happen. What can we do about it? One thing springs to mind when talking about any school not providing a place for a child. The

committee will be aware of the programme that is in place whereby schools are compelled to accept children with special educational needs. We have a similar provision in the legislation for TESS and we have used it. TESS can compel the school to accept a child. That has been used where a place is not available but we believe that there is space in the school. Nobody wants to get to that point because obviously schools should be accepting children where there is room in the school and so on. However, that can be and has been done. I will be happy to talk to the Senator offline about any particular case.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I fully take what Ms O'Neill is saying, but consider a parent who did not have access to education as a child and does not have that one good person to support them and their advocacy and does not know their rights because their literacy is poor. There is no family resource centre in Ballinasloe to help. That parent is at an immediate disadvantage until someone somewhere flags up that that child is not attending school. We do not have public health nurses going in and out of every house either. The child slips through the cracks very quickly and stays on that crack until he or she is seven and a half years old and somebody says it is wrong. I am not talking about just one child. I am aware of three who were not at school at seven and a half years old. They slipped through the crack for one and a half years, whether that is a Tusla crack or an education crack. These parents do not know how to compel.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: I completely take that point. We all know how important that one good person is, in lots of spheres. The role of the educational welfare officer as a warranted officer is to ensure that the child is attending education and to compel the school where necessary. They are available to people. The role of the community link workers that we are putting in place is to try to ensure that everyone is aware of those and to mediate that in a culturally sensitive way, be available to this community and make sure they are linked into those services. I think that will be a very important asset in this space.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: But if I am a principal and I have said no and said I am full and now I have the community link worker, I am hardly going to throw myself under the bus and say, "Actually, I refused."

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: The community link worker would be working with the family and linking in with the educational welfare officer, who, as I said, is a warranted officer and has the right to go into the school and say what needs to happen if that is the case, but that-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: But how is the child identified? I am trying to figure out how the child gets identified because we have capacity issues now in our early years sector, so perhaps the child has never got the Tusla support to even attend a local crèche. Where does the child, from an education point of view, get identified and flagged? That is the piece I want to know.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: We can check things with colleagues in TESS, but my understanding is that the educational welfare officer becomes aware of children in his or her area and goes out and proactively supports them where that is the case. Ideally, in a circumstance like this, the community link worker would be aware of a school-age child, but we have not put the community link workers in place yet. This is a new post. We are literally recruiting them. This is how we visualise it working. The community link workers will be available to the community such that they will link in with the EWO where necessary, but first they will support the parent if he or she is looking for a school place. They will then link, if necessary, with the EWO, and EWOs have ongoing information about where places are available. We used this model very successfully with Ukrainian students who were coming in where we did not necessarily know where there were school places. We put in place a structured team around the country to know

where there was capacity. That has worked extremely well, so we have learnings from that that we will be able to apply in this space.

Did Ms Cullen want to come in on the role of the CLWs and so on?

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Two other things come to mind when the Senator mentions the supports around the family and the link to the schools. A lot of our schools have home school community liaison officers. Their job is to make sure that that link between the school, the community and the family is happening. That is their role within the DEIS programme. We have had a number of those posts in non-DEIS schools as well over the past few years.

As regards the other aspect, I met recently, when we were doing the link worker piece, with one of the Traveller projects. This one was in Tuam. We were looking at the work those projects can also do to support those families as regards the local knowledge. When the Senator mentioned feuding, this group came to mind because this Traveller project had done a lot of work in the community across the different feuding families, etc., and then linking the children back into the school system. The Senator is absolutely right. There are gangs in the settled community too. This is not unique to the Traveller community. At the same time, however, many families in a Travelling community would be in the same area and, therefore, probably in the same school. I think there is something we can do to work very closely with the projects, which is part of what we are trying to do with the forum, and then these link workers, our home school community liaison and our school completion programme. Ms O'Neill has mentioned the REALTs and the response as regards Ukraine. It is a matter of trying to look at having a local response such that you can co-ordinate the resources that sometimes are already there but are maybe just not linking up. I thought I would mention that.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: The forum we have is a place where people can raise this kind of issue and we can work through what all these challenges are, how they are different in different parts of the country and how we might address them. I suppose that is where the ideas for many of the items in the strategy have come from. We think it will continue to evolve in that way, so as different issues come to the fore we will work with people locally and regionally to find solutions to some of them.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: To finish, it is important to acknowledge that you absolutely cannot compare Tuam and Ballinasloe at the moment. I find it shocking to believe they are actually poles apart, but Ballinasloe is not unique. I talk to people in Clare. Being a Senator now, I am for the entire country; I am no longer constrained to east Galway, which is the most wonderful part of-----

Deputy John Connolly: The country is so fortunate, so we are.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Yes. I am in that unique role. Anyway, from talking to people, I have found that feuding has been an issue, as has kids not being identified. Strategies are great but implementation is powerful. It is a matter of the implementation of that lived experience, and that lived experience comes from the families themselves. We have already identified - it has been said numerous times - their literacy and numeracy. This is intergenerational. That is the dial we need the strategy on, the dial of the intergenerational, to ensure they can participate equally.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the witnesses for coming in. I can see from their engagement and their answers that they are passionate about this area. It is very welcome to see

that that extra input and effort is there on their part. Like Senator Rabbitte, I advocated for them to come in because education is critical when speaking about the Traveller community in order that a sufficient number of members of the Travelling community can have that level of education and can advocate for themselves properly and effectively. That is so important.

As regards the school environment, I listened to Senator Rabbitte speak about the school principals and staff and so on, who may not be the most encouraging in certain areas in getting Traveller pupils into the school system. In the witnesses' experience, what feedback do they have as to how tough an environment it is for Traveller children to be in a school setting? We all know - I have young children myself - that the schoolyard can be a difficult place. Children do not have the understanding, I suppose, of their behaviour and how it can impact on others and can be so emotionally difficult for their peers in school and so on. I imagine Traveller children must experience that quite a lot in terms of prejudice and the different background they come from as an ethnic minority and so on. In the witnesses' experience, how much do they think that is an issue for retaining Traveller children in the school system? If the children themselves do not want to go because they do not have a healthy, welcoming environment in school, we are up against a very difficult battle in trying to increase participation overall. I would be interested to hear the witnesses' views on that.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: Before we were preparing the Traveller and Roma strategy in the Department, we were working on the Cineáltas programme, which the Deputy and the committee might be familiar with. It is the action plan on bullying, which was published in 2022. As part of the research and preparation for that work, there was a huge amount of engagement and consultation with children and young people. As a result of that programme, the Department set up its dedicated student participation unit to ensure we hear the voice of children. A large number of children and young people were consulted. At some point in that consultation we realised we had not sufficiently heard the voice of Traveller children and young people so we did a specific dedicated consultation as part of that. We probably learned a lot as a Department as to how we did that. We had some very vocal children and young people, including some young Traveller women, who said, "We will only talk to you in this group; we will not talk to you in that group", and so on. We learned a lot. As a result of that, specific actions were included in that strategy because we heard from children and young people about their experiences in school that were negative in that they had been victims of discrimination and bullying. If they had not been a victim, they had a fear that it might happen. That was a really important understanding. Part of that fear stemmed from the fact that they felt a lack of understanding of their culture. Earlier, we referenced the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Our commitment to this predated the Traveller and Roma strategy. It is in the Cineáltas strategy because it came about from the children and young people saying they wanted to see their culture represented in school, and they wanted it to be a welcoming place for them. I will not say we were doing it anyway but it was part of other work on the well-being of those children and young people in school. While it is an integral part of this strategy, these things knit together. We need these children to feel that school is a welcoming place, where they want to be. Otherwise, how do we get them to go and to stay? We know this is very important.

To the point on whether children have experienced negativity in school, unfortunately they have, as, I am sure, many Travellers can attest to experiencing negativity in wider society. What we are trying to do is make sure this does not happen to the same extent and that there is greater understanding. Ms Cullen outlined how we are working with initial teacher education to ensure that teachers are very well equipped to understand Traveller culture and history and to deal with any issues that might arise. The Cineáltas strategy has a whole-school approach on

bullying to equip schools with the knowledge and tools they need to deal with any incidents or issues that might arise. Well-being in school is incredibly important to the success of the rest of the strategy.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Ms O'Neill has been very comprehensive in speaking about these large elements of the work. After Cineáltas we moved into consultation on the Traveller and Roma strategy. We had a very good advisory group with the Traveller and Roma communities. One of the sad things that happened during that was when one of the people from one of the leading Traveller organisations told me they were so sad to see that some of this is still happening. They thought that maybe we had moved on. There are still incidents in the system. We had a very comprehensive consultation process and all of the reports are published online. It builds on a lot of work and research done beforehand. The themes are there. The Traveller community will say very openly there is racism and discrimination. It is in our society and our schools. We are trying to tackle the school element of that in the work we are doing.

We worked through Hub na nÓg to do the consultation with the children and young people. It was very well done. We learned a lot in the consultation, perhaps more than we did when working on Cineáltas. We worked through the communities to do all of our consultation. People will not open up to those behind the desk here. We worked through the Traveller organisations and the projects, and we also had the voices of the children and young people. There is a lovely piece on the website about what we heard from the young people and what we are trying to do in response to it. There are very nice visuals and much of it was done through art. Very interesting work was done by Hub na nÓg. Unfortunately, the issue does exist and that is why we are here.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the witnesses. It sounds as though they are very well aware of it and are trying to develop strategies to deal with it. They mentioned educating teachers and that is important. Equally, educating fellow pupils on Traveller culture is very important. There is a different culture, different backgrounds and a different way of life. It is very important that students understand that. This has to be a key part of it.

Deputy John Connolly: I have to say, as someone from the teaching profession who has held the position of school principal, it is extremely disappointing to hear the lived experience of my colleagues, particularly regarding school enrolment and admission. Do we have some data on this? Do we know whether members of the Traveller community have taken section 29 appeals against schools that have declined their application to enrol? If we do, have they been successful? Who supports families in this situation? A Traveller or settled family might have encountered a school declining their application to enrol but may not be aware of the section 29 process. Who supports them in trying to do that?

Do we have data on the number of Traveller families who make applications to Tusla to educate their children at home? It would be interesting to see that. I have experienced it in my professional background. A number of Traveller families made such applications. It disappointed me but that was their choice. Is it widespread or was it an isolated incident?

To go back to the information provided earlier on dropout rates, it seems that third year of secondary school is an issue. If we know that, surely we have to develop a strategy around it. Of course, the strategy would involve additional personnel in schools. I do not want to personalise everything but nothing disappointed me more than a Traveller pupil going through our primary school, getting on really well, attaining a high level of education and feeling part of the community - this was our perception and it might not have been their perception - and then

they went on to secondary school and we heard back they had left secondary school and had not got on as well. It used to disappoint me greatly. I understand fully, and I agree, that good habits start very young. If we know that in third year in secondary school there is a drop from 90% to less than 30% or 40%, surely we have to have a strategy to intervene at that point and say we can do better.

In the past, there used to be an allocation of a supplementary teacher for schools with a significant number of enrolments from the Traveller community. This was cut a number of years ago. It was cut on the grounds there might have been an element of discrimination, or an inference of discrimination or highlighting ethnic difference. Was that a good idea? Should we review it again? Does the model we have for allocating supplementary teachers to schools take account of schools where there is a significant population of children from the Traveller community? Are schools weighted heavier in terms of the proportion of supplementary teachers they get because of that? I am not sure whether the strategy says this, but I know that DEIS rural schools do not have home-school liaison officers. That is something we need to look at. The strategy for Traveller and Roma children should look at making sure that in each DEIS school there is a home-school liaison officer. I would like one in every school but particularly in DEIS rural schools there is a need for them.

The issue of transition has come up a lot in many discussions. Recent research undertaken by the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, on the EPSEN Act showed that families do not exhibit the same level of satisfaction with transition as they do with other aspects of their school journey. There is transition from preschool to junior infants and from primary school to secondary school but for Traveller families there is a higher level of transition as, perhaps because of the tradition of travelling, they may enrol in various schools in various locations. Do we have any data on these transitions? How do we monitor this and make sure it does not have an impact? Senator Noonan mentioned that we should have preschool facilities on the site of primary schools. That is a good idea. There would be higher participation rates from Traveller families if we did so. We should look at that.

The Minister has advised me the NCSE has published transition guidelines between all stages of education designed to assist parents to support their children to make successful transitions. Should there be a specific strategy on supporting Traveller children during the transitionary period? I welcome the appointment of the community link workers. Will they be Tusla employees or Department of education employees? Will they be teachers? The number, at 15, seems small. Where will they be located or how will they be allocated throughout the country? It is a positive development and I look forward to them starting their roles.

As I have gone through my teaching career, I have pondered the benefit of homework. The application of homework suits certain families more than others. It is an advantage for many families but it is a disadvantage for some and it makes life more difficult. It makes school life more difficult for some children. I asked the Minister recently when was the last time any information was provided by the Department in terms of homework, be it curricular or circular. That was some time ago and we need to look at it.

Do we know if many members of the Traveller community are working in the education sector? Do we have a strategy around trying to promote this? Given the importance of family support in terms of educational access and provision, are people employed in Traveller support groups with the specific remit of helping families through the education process?

An Cathaoirleach: There are a few questions there for the witnesses.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: There was a lot in there. We will go through them as best we can between us. I do not believe we have disaggregated data for section 29 appeals, but I will have to check. I do not think we do, but I will see.

In relation to the Tusla system concerning applications to the alternative education registration service under TESS, the alternative education assessment and registration service, AEARS, is the registration service for educating children at home. I am not certain whether it has disaggregated data but we will check that too and come back to the Deputy.

The Deputy spoke a little bit about the third year of post-primary school. There are two elements to that. One is people ageing out, because 16 is an age at which it is possible to leave school. There are also alternatives that exist in the further education system. From our colleagues in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, we see that a number of the students who leave do attend further and higher education. As a part of the strategy, we are working very closely with that Department to see if that provision is one that works for those children and young people and if they are gaining qualifications, leaving and doing well in this context. They might be going on to Youthreach and community training centres, and we can see numbers that correspond.

Deputy John Connolly: I have one quick question. Do the educational welfare officers still work at that level?

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: The remit of the educational welfare officers goes up to 16.

As I was saying, we can see that aspect regarding further and higher education in relation to Youthreach and so on. We will continue through this strategy, and we have great relationships there anyway. It is about ensuring we are not dropping children and young people at that stage. I agree with the Deputy that third year is a critical year. We can see the numbers who start, the numbers who sit the examination and what happens in that space. There are a number of programmes around the country we can learn from, now that we are placing such a focus on this in the strategy. We are working with a couple of ETBs directly in this respect.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: In terms of that third-year focus, the Traveller families would tell us we need to start earlier. Regarding whole-school guidance, there is an action in the strategy too to look at how guidance is working in our schools for the Traveller and Roma children, and also with transition year, including whether it is an attractive offering at transition year. I am working with colleagues who are working on the transition year aspect. We do this with the DEIS programme element too and what we call DEIS plus, which members are probably becoming more familiar with. It is concerned with very high-end disadvantage in a concentration of schools. There can be soft barriers there that we might not be getting underneath. Those things are worth mentioning too.

The Traveller and Roma families themselves and the communities would say that getting children to the leaving certificate is absolutely what we should be trying to do. Whether 16 is the statutory age or not, while they can move on to higher education through various pathways now, they will have a better chance if they sit the leaving certificate examinations. That is very much the concentration. We almost start in the upper end of primary school now in terms of looking at the guidance there. These are things we are exploring through the work we are doing.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: To the Deputy's point, there is a parental awareness context there too in terms of things like subject choice and being aware of routes being open. The guidance

plays a really critical role there. I will ask Ms Cullen to talk a little about the DEIS planning. The Minister has indicated she wants a new DEIS plan to be published by the end of the year. In terms of the allocation of teaching posts through the DEIS programme and so on, that is really important, as is how the weighting of Traveller students is used in determining DEIS and resource allocations. We might just mention that. There is also additional capitation funding that goes with that in respect of Traveller students. The OECD report we commissioned and that was published last year in respect of resource allocation under the DEIS programme noted where schools are in DEIS and not in DEIS and that there are always students at risk of educational disadvantage attending non-DEIS schools. The question is how those students are being supported, and this is certainly something we are looking at through the new educational disadvantage plan.

The Deputy also referred to the home-school liaison officers. We have several pilot areas that are not DEIS schools but where we have put in place home-school community liaison schemes entirely due to the number of Traveller students in those schools. We think this is a really positive step forward under the plan too.

Regarding transitions, there is a transition steering group between us, the early years unit, the National Council for Special Education, SOLAS and the ETBs looking at transitions. I am not as familiar with the work, but my understanding is that the group looks at all the different levels. We will certainly be asking it to have a particular focus on Travellers. One of the things we need to do as we work through the strategy and identify new actions all the time, which is the method we are using, is to ensure we have data and research of this kind and identify where we do not have it and what we need it for.

On preschools on site, it is a model tried in a couple of places. Obviously, we do not have policy responsibility in respect of preschools, but a number of schools do have a preschool on site and there is usually a high transition rate. That is a matter for early years policy.

I am definitely not qualified to respond to the question on homework. I will have to check in with some colleagues on the curriculum side and the inspectorate side.

The Deputy also mentioned transition guidance and whether it would be worth having something similar in respect of the Traveller community. When we talked about things like the video we did for the Traveller community on the publication of the strategy, the resources and reduced school days, that is exactly the kind of thing we would like to target, namely, where we would provide easy guidance on how to move from primary school to post-primary school and how it can be done. Those kinds of things are on our agenda for really useful guides for parents on things they will find useful. The forum is the way in which we surface those things with the groups. Ms Cullen might take the question on teachers.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: In terms of the DEIS piece, first, we had a major review of the DEIS programme allocation model in recent years. It was published last summer by the OECD. We are drawing on it in all the work we are looking at with DEIS. The Minister has committed to a new DEIS programme and to publish the plans for that programme by the end of the year. Within it, and this would be relevant to the Traveller and Roma context too, there will be a DEIS plus programme. This will recognise there are a number of areas of the country where there is a very high level of educational disadvantage and disadvantage and deprivation in general. We are looking at what suite of supports can be provided. We have a number of governance and technical groups, etc., working on that and the Traveller piece comes into that too. The boundary in terms of what we can do will depend, obviously, on how the discussions on the Estimates

and budgets go. The plan will be there, though. It may be over a phased basis, but there is very much a recognition of that need.

Regarding the DEIS rural piece, my understanding of the model we use is that it is the concentration of disadvantage and the multiplier effect within the school that actually has the impact. The Deputy is probably very familiar with this. When we look at the outcomes in rural schools, they are not as impacted in terms of the concentration of disadvantage. That is the reasoning as to why it is not there.

As the Deputy is probably aware, HSCL is a qualified teaching post. We have within our system pressure on teaching supply. Therefore, one of the things we are trying to look at is how we get that joined-up working within the posts we do have. The HSCLs are working very closely with our new link workers. The areas of the link workers are in the opening statement. They were picked based on high Traveller enrolment.

Deputy John Connolly: I did not see that. My apologies.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Not at all. There is a long list of them, so I will not go through it again, but just for reference, they are there. What we did is we looked at the Traveller enrolment.

The other thing to remember - sometimes when I get caught up looking at this stuff, I wonder why we are not further along - is that the ethnic identifier for Travellers is quite new within the system, so even just being able to track where the children and young people are and are not is something we are building all the time. Regarding the school returns this coming October, it will force a consent or non-consent with regard to one's ethnicity, including Traveller ethnicity. More information may come through that. When we look at the numbers enrolled and the overall population, we are not that far off. Travellers are 0.65% of the total population. Our enrolment at primary is 1.6%, which is kind of strange. We obviously have problems with the overall data. The enrolment in post-primary is at 0.8%. Therefore, we are there or thereabouts in respect of capturing the ethnicity. However, that data is still quite new and we are getting better at how we use it.

One thing to mention, if there is time, is we have a contract with the ESRI, which is looking at the monitoring and evaluation framework for all our work on educational disadvantage. That has a particular focus on how we measure the impact of what we are doing with the Traveller and Roma strategies within that. I hope that will bring more to the table as well.

Deputy John Connolly: The link workers will not be teachers. We will not be putting more demand-----

Ms Gráinne Cullen: No.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: No, they are not. It was a recommendation from the OECD report that there be what it termed "cultural mediators". The two national co-ordinators are in place and we are recruiting. We are trying to make sure we do not necessarily take them from other places, although I received a complaint recently about how a body was losing one of its really good people because that person was coming to us, which is great for us. It is about ensuring that they have a good understanding of the Traveller community.

Deputy John Connolly: They are Tusla employees.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: It will contract to the school completion programme. It is a mecha-

nism we have. The governance, training and all of that work will be with this new team we have put into TESS.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I welcome our guests and thank them for their painstaking detail and responses. Inevitably, there will be a level of repetition. There are similar themes all the time. It is important that every one of us explores the issues fully.

If our guests do not mind, I will ask my few questions one by one and get their responses one by one rather than ask them all together. Returning to early childhood education, it is wonderful. Beside me at home, we have a lovely crèche or Montessori, whatever the terminology is. It is well run and lovely and there is mass participation. It is a great thing. What data do the witnesses have on Traveller participation in those? There are also the local resource centres, which would provide it in some instances. Perhaps the witnesses could revert to early childhood education for a moment.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Early childhood care and education comes under the Department of children, so it is not our area but I can give the Senator the data that I have.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Please.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: In the 2023-24 year, 76% of the Traveller children who entered our junior infants - that is where we start to track them so we know where they come from - came from an ECCE programme.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is quite good. The question arises about the other 24%, of course, but it is still positive. It is critical. I am a teacher by background. I have taught Travellers as well. Speaking as a teacher, and as all the best psychological research shows and as the witness are well aware, early intervention is critical. That is good, but there is the question of the 24%. I know it is the Department of children and we should probably redirect that question. Perhaps the secretariat could get that question of the 24% explored in the relevant area.

Moving on, I will say something completely irrelevant to the questions now. My colleague, Senator Maria Byrne, the Leas-Chathaoirleach of the Seanad, wanted me to publicly record her apology. She has been missing meetings for reasons that those of us who are anoraks know. She is caught with a post-election dispute. She is missing the meetings but she wants no misunderstanding around her missing the meetings.

Coming to the second question, I lived through much of this. There is huge progress in participation levels in primary. They transition to secondary and it is brilliant right up to the junior certificate. The witnesses have gone through the figures and I will not take them back through those. What are their top three strategies to get over this hump, for want of a better English word, and get people to do the leaving certificate? Specifically, I ask them to hone in on transition year. It would be exciting if there was good Traveller participation in transition year as a prelude to the leaving certificate. Are the witnesses' organisations resourced enough in their top three strategies? If not, do we have any role in getting it? Are they specially resourced to do the three things? Where are we at?

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: Attendance is crucial. Good attendance at primary and moving into post-primary-----

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Good attendance before then is crucial to them wanting to go on.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: It is crucial to later success. That holds for every child but we need to pay particular attention to it here. The work we are putting in place with the community link workers, aligned with the universal supports we are putting in place around attendance, should reap a reward for us. We hope to see that coming to fruition.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Are the community link workers from among the Traveller community?

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: It is community link workers and also-----

Senator Joe O'Reilly: They are Travellers.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: The job advertisements for the link workers have gone out across all 15. I think there is only one we are waiting to be advertised. Within the advertisement, it goes through the role, and part of the role is they would have had at least experience of working with the Traveller or Roma community, given that the role relates to Traveller and Roma. It is not specified that they must be from one or other of the communities but the job requirement is focusing on, having knowledge of and having worked with those communities. There would be many people through the STAR programme who would have worked as education workers. They would not necessarily be from the community but they would have huge experience. I can check it but there is a line that mentions what is essential and what is desirable.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: In east London, there is empirical evidence that shows that youth workers who come from the communities being targeted have a much greater impact.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Yes.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: We do not live in an ideal world, but perhaps this could be considered insofar as it could. Do the witnesses envisage that link workers will be like margarine or will they be able to focus on communities? Will there be enough of them? They would not want to just visit, say, Cavan one day, Louth the next and not get back to Cavan, Louth or Meath for another three months? Will they be fit to focus in?

Ms Gráinne Cullen: We must work with what we have in terms of the geographic areas and the numbers for which we have funding. There will be a spread in terms of the work of the link worker. As link workers are based in the school completion programme, they work within a team of people, with a co-ordinator and other project workers who are focused on all of the school community. Link workers' work is to make sure that Traveller and Roma children engage with the school completion programme activity and to engage with the families to ensure understanding and communication of that. It is not that they are doing a whole separate activity. It is actually that engagement and trying to get children better linked into what is already on the ground.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Some of the team will be focused in on every need and on every person.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Yes,-----

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is good.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: -----but these people will have the lens of the Traveller and Roma person.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: The link workers are key, as is the attendance piece.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Yes.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: What else matters?

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: A supportive school environment.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Yes.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: A whole-school approach to the curriculum, which we have discussed. There is the framework for well-being and the way in which a school should be a nurturing and welcoming place for every child. The whole-school approach and well-being framework are crucial.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: And there is the visible culture piece.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: Yes. Behind that comes the teacher training and an openness to parental engagement, which is crucial. The third element is the inclusion of the Traveller piece in the curriculum. The following holds true for all children, but inspectorate colleagues have told me and would tell this committee that quality teaching and learning is the most important part. Once there is a nurturing environment, quality teaching and learning, and engagement of a child, are the most important factors to ensure good learning and success.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I wish to make a general anecdotal observation, as I do not have any special data or specific empirical evidence. I have noticed that a number of Travellers go to Youthreach at 15 or 16 years of age.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: That is right.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Youthreach is excellent but one would hope that the maximum number would stay in mainstream education.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Yes.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: I have written a note here about senior cycle redevelopment and changing the senior cycle from having a very concentrated focus on examinations at the end of two years to a more graduated programme with better and additional assessment components. We are moving to a model of 40% assessment throughout the two years. We hope that this will better suit a number of young people. The evidence certainly supports that. Along with the introduction of new subjects and new subject specifications, we hope to see an engaging curriculum that invites young people to learn while allowing them to show skills that might not be best showcased in a final written exam. This will speak to a lot of young people in terms of their skills and talents.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I am not being patronising or messing when I say that I am genuinely impressed by the strategies, how the Department officials are going about implementing them and their enthusiasm for same.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: I thank the Senator.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: My final question relates to my previous one. It is something that Senator Noonan honed in on today and other days, namely, the idea of Traveller culture being understood or celebrated throughout the school. Perhaps this could be done through the cur-

riculum or as part of special days in schools where there would be entertainment. Part of that could be music or song, both of which are very much imbedded in Traveller culture. It would be good to have Traveller culture as a medium in schools generally to get respect and prevent bullying while keeping Travellers happy in school. Do the witnesses have more to say in that regard? Is the Department working on introducing Traveller culture everywhere?

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Interestingly, I visited Adamstown National School in County Wexford as part of the STAR project. It is an old primary school and as I walked in the door, I could see that two walls of the building had painted images of wagons and fabulous Traveller graphics. I asked the principal whether the graphics were new and done for us but I was told that they had been there for the previous 25 years.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Great.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Some schools have already embraced Traveller culture. I will cite another experience. I used to work on the Ukraine programme. I had not visited schools for quite a while but when I visited a primary school, the first thing I saw when I went through the door was a map of the world - we would probably see it in every school now - with tags to represent the countries from where all the children came from.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Yes, there is a lot of that.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: It was very visual and I went "Wow". To give a long answer to a short question, the intercultural guidelines, which are under review by the NCCA, should and will look at all of the different cultures and how diversity and inclusion work in all our schools for all our children. That is the starting point.

We are definitely developing a targeted piece. I think the Senator was present to hear what we said about that.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I will finish with a comment. So much success has been achieved with participation in primary and the junior certificate cycle. From what the witnesses have told me, there is remarkably good participation in early childhood education, albeit with a deficit of 24%. Obviously, there are a lot of issues within that 24%. However, it is brilliant that so much has been achieved. Everyone concerned should be congratulated and should take a bow. On days like this, we tend to focus on the negative, but there has been a remarkable level of achievement compared to years ago. The big target now is to get children to progress to transition year and the leaving certificate.

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Yes.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: If the witnesses can achieve that, it will be remarkable.

An Cathaoirleach: Does Deputy Cummins have anything to add?

Ms Gráinne Cullen: We can catch up again.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I hope that the witnesses can attend the Joint Committee on Education and Youth because this issue is really important. I am struck by how not everyone who sits on the education committee comes from an education background. I am saying this as if I were the Chairperson of that committee, which I am not, but it would be great to have the witnesses in so that could hear about that lens.

Unfortunately, due to Departments being separate and data being collected in a certain way, links are often not made in terms of the transition from mainstream school to alternative education. I would love to see that transition being smoother because one can see the success stories of the young people who go to those settings.

Ms Cliodhna O'Neill: That is right. They did.

Deputy Jen Cummins: We can see how well young people benefited, be they Traveller children or settled children. I know from my own experience that we put great emphasis on mainstream education, but we should be putting emphasis on Youthreach, community training centres and other places that provide an excellent level of education in a way that is appropriate for each person, with care and kindness. We should celebrate that as much as we celebrate the other milestones reached by students.

To follow on from Senator O'Reilly, we see real success by people in the Traveller community when they are in third level education and complete third level education. There is a person in my constituency who has completed a PhD. We are all very proud of him. When we reach that point and there are no barriers to education at any level, we will really be ar mhuin na muice, as my mother used to say.

An Cathaoirleach: Well said.

I thank Ms Cullen, Ms O'Neill and Ms Bumster for their attendance and for their comprehensive interaction with the members. We certainly gained a lot from it and I hope they gained something from the questioning-----

Ms Gráinne Cullen: Absolutely.

An Cathaoirleach: -----and perhaps something they can bring back to incorporate into the wonderful projects and work they are involved in.

The joint committee adjourned at 2:51 p.m. *sine die.*