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NESF calls for a policy on literacy for all children

A major report launched today (11.11.09) by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) shows that there has been little change in levels of child literacy problems among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds over the last 25 years.

The report focused on the implementation of the Department of Education and Science's 2005 Action Plan, *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS), which sets out Government policy on educational disadvantage, including literacy. The DEIS target group is primary school children living in disadvantaged communities, and nearly one in three pupils attending schools there have serious literacy difficulties - three times the national average. The poor levels of literacy for these pupils are in marked contrast to the national average, as Ireland is one of the top-performing countries in terms of overall literacy performance for those aged 15.

According to Dr. Maureen Gaffney, Chair of the NESF,

'Despite many good practice and successful initiatives both in-school and out-of-school, there has been little significant shift nationally in levels of child literacy problems among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds over the last 25 years. The cost of this is high, both for individuals and society as a whole. For example, a UK study showed that the cost to the public purse of failure to learn to read in primary school was up to £2.05bn per year¹. But for individuals the cost is incalculable – the loss of life chances in securing an education, getting secure and well-paid employment, and being able to participate fully in society.

Report findings

The NESF report found DEIS to be a well-designed policy aimed at providing a range of supports to disadvantaged schools, with policy objectives, targets and outcomes. DEIS advisors made a positive contribution to delivering programmes and improving literacy teaching. Some of the schools studied for the NESF report were very successful in putting in place plans and actions to tackle the literacy challenges they meet. Such schools were characterised by a culture of high staff expectations, a culture of rewarding success, strong leadership from the principal, a shared vision, agreed targets and action plans.

However the Report also found a number of weaknesses in implementation. These include:

- There have been delays in rolling out DEIS services – many were not rolled out until 2007, two years after the programme was intended to start. Some schools still have not received all supports.
- The implementation plan for DEIS is not publicly available.
- A clearer link is needed between the NAPS² target (that literacy problems in disadvantaged schools are reduced from 30% to 15% by 2016), and targets that schools set themselves - which remain confidential.
- There is no apparent penalty for failing to achieve the NAPS literacy goal. Nor is there a system to reward success under DEIS.
- Links between community and family-based literacy initiatives, and school-based initiatives, are minimal. DEIS policy and implementation is slow to capture these community resources.
- DEIS only covers primary schools which are designated as disadvantaged - approximately 22% of all primary schools - so it cannot reach children experiencing educational disadvantage in other schools.
- DEIS supports individual schools to define for themselves what a successful outcome is in terms of pupil literacy, but does then leave it to the individual schools to decide what that outcome is. Some schools set very high standards for this and work hard to achieve them, but others seem to struggle to articulate a positive literacy policy and to create the organisational culture that can deliver it.

¹ KPMG Foundation (2006) *The Long Term Costs of Literacy Difficulties*

² National Action Plan for Social Inclusion, 2007-2016

Recommendations

The Report's key recommendation is the development of a National Literacy Policy Framework.

As Dr Maureen Gaffney, Chairperson of the NESF, says:

'A National Literacy Policy Framework is needed to clearly articulate what every school is expected to achieve and the best ways to support teachers to achieve this. Such a policy would provide a shared vision for future action with greater policy coherence and integration and would ensure a strategic focus on child literacy.'

This broad framework for all children needs to include particular supports for those experiencing disadvantage, such as targeted interventions for disadvantaged pupils, and continuous professional development in literacy for teachers.

A number of other recommendations were also made to ensure more effective implementation of the DEIS policy. These include:

- A partnership approach to literacy, involving the various education and community stakeholders, and covering all ages from early childhood to adulthood;
- A stronger articulation of short-term and long-term targets;
- Co-ordination at local and national level;
- Greater clarity on the accountability and responsibility of the various stakeholders;
- More precise implementation and action plans;
- Built-in process evaluation and feedback procedures; and
- More incentives for success.

These recommendations tie into previous studies on policy implementation carried out by the NESF³, which stress that effective policy implementation requires clear national strategy, rigorous measurement and evaluation, clear accountability, detailed delivery plans, links between desired policy outcomes and budgets, and a focus on the culture of organisations designing and delivering policy.

Finally, a steering committee on literacy and social inclusion, with an independent Chair, should be set up under the Department of Education and Science, to drive forward the report's recommendations.

Dr Gaffney went on to say, at today's launch by Fergus Finlay:

'Ireland has a strong record in achieving overall national results for literacy. We can and indeed must achieve better results for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This will require concerted and systematic action by all stakeholders. It cannot be achieved unless we reach out to and include the families and communities of these children. It cannot be solved by schools alone.'

She concluded by saying that:

'In the 21st century, the importance of literacy cannot be overstated. It opens the door to educational, economic and health benefits for the individual and for society as a whole. The economic and social costs in not dealing more effectively with literacy difficulties in childhood are severe – such as early school leaving, truancy, low self-esteem, poor job prospects – not just for the children themselves, but also for their children. We hope that this report, focusing on an issue of critical importance to Ireland's long term economic and social success, is a wake-up call to the urgency of this issue and is a useful contribution in a policy landscape that is facing unprecedented urgent and rapid change in the immediate future.'

ENDS

For further information, please contact:

Paula Hennelly, NESF, 16 Parnell Square, 01 8146361/8146300, paula.hennelly@nesf.ie.

Dr Maureen Gaffney 01 8146361

³ See *Implementation of the Home Care Package Scheme*, (NESF, 2009)

Note for Editors

Background to the Report

This report is one of four which the NESF is currently undertaking and which focus on the most effective ways to implement policy. The learning from these reports will be used to ensure more effective policy implementation, and so delivery of better public services.

For this report, *Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues*, a case study approach was adopted. Four schools were selected for detailed study. These four serve disadvantaged communities taking part in the DEIS Programme in Cork, Limerick and Dublin. A focus on community projects was also included, to demonstrate ways that school, family and community combine on the ground. In addition, 95 submissions were received from various stakeholders (teachers, parents, principals, libraries, university departments, partnership companies, and voluntary and community organisations, among others).

Findings

The case study research found that some schools, despite facing similar challenges and with similar resources, were more positive about their work and their effectiveness in tackling literacy problems than others. These tended to be schools with high staff expectations, a culture of rewarding success, strong leadership, a shared vision, agreed targets and action plans.

DEIS is broadly welcomed by the schools for providing needed resources, supports and training. In particular, teachers and principals emphasised the value of structured programmes under DEIS, as well as the new focus on planning across the school and setting targets; and effective leadership and teamwork. Weaknesses that were noted in DEIS included high staff turnover in some schools, the resource-intensive nature of some programmes, the fragmented experience of DEIS on the ground, and the suitability of the literacy assessments being used.

Recommendations

In the light of these findings, the NESF has made a number of recommendations which include the following:

- Central to those recommendations is the introduction of a National Literacy Policy Framework to clearly articulate what every school is expected to achieve and the best ways to support teachers to achieve this. Such a policy would provide a shared vision for future action with greater policy coherence and integration and would ensure a strategic focus on child literacy;
- A Steering Committee on Literacy and Social Inclusion, with an independent Chair, should be established under the auspices of the Department of Education and Science, and representative of all the main stakeholders, with a clear mandate from the Government to drive forward the recommendations contained in this report;
- The NESF strongly recommends that literacy be approached in a holistic way from early childhood to adulthood – and that a partnership approach between the various education and community stakeholders – including parents, at local and national level, is essential for success; and
- The NESF recommends a stronger articulation of short-term and long-term targets, co-ordinated at local and national level; greater clarity with regard to the accountability and responsibility of the various stakeholders; more precise implementation and action plans; built-in process evaluation and feedback procedures and more incentives for success.

The NESF

The NESF was established by the government in 1993, and has focused on monitoring and analysing measures and programmes concerned with the achievement of equality and social inclusion. In 2007, the Government asked the NESF to focus on ways to improve the implementation of policies on the ground. This report is the second of two focusing on implementation of social policies, with the first one examining Home Care Packages.

The NESF is the largest social partnership organisation, and its membership comprises four broad strands, namely (i) members of the Oireachtas, (ii) employer / business and farm bodies, (iii) community and voluntary sector, and (iv) central government, local government and independents.

NESF Project Team

The Project Team for the Child Literacy and Social Inclusion report was drawn from the NESF membership, and was chaired by Professor Aine Hyland (ex UCC). The Team comprised elected representatives from all the main political parties in the Oireachtas, the social partners and educationalists. The Team received 95 submissions from the public and had a wide range of consultations with individuals and organisations.

For further background information contact Paula Hennelly at the National Economic and Social Forum, 16 Parnell Square, Dublin 1 Tel: 01 814 6361.