DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

Dé Máirt, 3 Nollaig 2019

Tuesday, 3 December 2019

The Joint Committee met at 11 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Joan Collins,	Paudie Coffey,
Martin Ferris,	Lynn Ruane,
Gino Kenny,	Fintan Warfield.
Fiona O'Loughlin.	

Seanadóir / Senator Colette Kelleher sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: We have received apologies from Deputy Ó Cuív, who will not be able to make the meeting today. Deputy Corcoran Kennedy is running a little bit late. We have many people to see, including two Ministers. I propose we now go into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 11.05 a.m. and resumed in public session at 11.10 a.m.

Traveller Education: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: I welcome Members and any viewers who may be watching our proceedings on Oireachtas TV. I also welcome our visitors in the Gallery, some of whom have already made presentations to this committee. Today is our final session of four on the issue of education. We have already listened to Ms Catherine Joyce of Blanchardstown Traveller Development Group; Ms Eileen Flynn of the National Traveller Women's Forum; Mr. Patrick Nevin of the Tallaght Traveller Community Development Project; Mr. Oein de Bhairdúin, a young Traveller who worked with me for a year in developing a programme on Traveller rights; Mr. Martin Collins of Pavee Point; Ms Shreya Chaturvedi; and Mr. Bernard Joyce of the Irish Traveller Movement's Yellow Flag programme. We have also heard from Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, a former Minister for Education and Skills and co-chair of the Traveller Oireachtas group; Dr. Teresa O' Doherty of Marino Institute of Education; and Mr. Patrick McDonagh, who is a PhD student in medieval history at Trinity College Dublin and a Traveller.

A big message we have heard in these sessions is that Travellers are not so much dropping out of education as being pushed out by the actions or inaction of the system. We learned that the practice of using reduced-hours timetables is all too common for Travellers. This is a good example of Travellers being pushed out of education, but it is not the only one. Ms Catherine Joyce of Blanchardstown Traveller Development Group described how her son, a 14 year old boy, adopts the role of teacher to educate the settled pupils and teacher in his class about the Traveller way of life in the absence of any formal inclusion of Traveller culture and history in the curriculum. When there is no positive reflection of Traveller life in our schools, we put enormous pressure on Traveller children and students to take up the role of teacher and representative. That role should not fall to a schoolchild. Children should be at school simply to learn and be educated. We heard from Mr. Oein de Bhairdúin that it is a misconception that Travellers do not value education. It is a myth that one often hears but it is not true. It is a falsehood. Bullying and discrimination are sad realities for many Traveller children, with schools and teachers often reluctant to, or ignorant as to how to, combat them. Four in ten Traveller children say that they have been bullied at school; that is 40%. Bright and eager learners are being pushed out of education due to ignorance and discrimination. I will state the facts about Traveller education again, facts with which we, as a committee, should be very familiar and know by now.

According to the 2016 census conducted by the Central Statistics Office, nearly six in ten male Travellers, 57.2%, were educated to primary level at most. Among Traveller females, just 13% were educated to upper secondary level or above, compared to almost seven in ten, 70%, of the general population. That is an enormous gap. A total of 167 Travellers, 0.5%, have third-

level qualifications. The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, report, A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland, found in 2017 that Travellers are over 50 times more likely to leave school without the leaving certificate in comparison with their counterparts in the non-Traveller population. There is an enormous gulf and disparity between the outcomes for Traveller children in the education system and the settled population. Only 8% of working-age Travellers, compared to 73% of non-Travellers, have reached leaving certificate level and fewer than one in ten Travellers aged 25 to 34 have completed second-level education compared with 86% nationally. These are the facts on which we have to reflect. We will be hearing about some of the welcome initiatives that are under way but we must put all those initiatives in the context of the huge disparities between the educational outcomes for Travellers and the general population.

Over the course of the sessions, we have heard a number of recommendations aimed at removing barriers to education for Travellers and they will be reflected in our final report. What was common among the recommendations was the need to provide education support to Travellers throughout their time in education, starting with the early years, continuing right through primary, junior and senior cycles and into third level. People need support at all stages from preschool to third level. However, we heard that it is not good enough to only support Travellers, we also need to make our schools the welcoming and warm places they should, and must, be for Travellers because Travellers have the same right to an education as everybody else.

Representatives of the Yellow Flag programme, from whom we heard last week, showed us an example of how to do this. They were also in the audiovisual room of the Oireachtas to award yellow flags to five primary schools and one secondary school. Those flags mark a school's inclusivity of all cultures and ethnicity, celebration of diversity and challenge to racism and discrimination.

One young Traveller boy remarked that, before the Yellow Flag programme, he was shy of speaking about his background but, after Traveller pride day in school, he felt proud and confident of his heritage, as he should be. All children should feel this way. No child should have to hide parts of themselves and that includes the need for intercultural awareness and anti-discriminatory training for teachers, a recommendation that is echoed in the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission's recent report, Ireland and the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which also specifically references the teaching of Traveller culture and history in schools.

We are talking about issues affecting Travellers in Leinster House this morning but they are also under consideration in Geneva where Ireland is reporting to the UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. We have much to do to put our house in order. The ideas and recommendations that will come from this committee will help our State to put its house in order. That is an important contribution that we, as a committee, will be making in the course of our reporting on this matter.

From the Department of Education and Skills, I welcome the Minister, Deputy McHugh, the Minister of State, Deputy Mitchell O'Connor, Mr. Enda Hughes, principal officer, and Ms Patricia Sheehan, assistant principal officer. I also welcome: Ms Tara Farrell, chairperson of Aontas; Ms Cathleen McDonagh Clark from the Education and Training Service; Mr. Neill McDermott from the Higher Education Authority, HEA; Ms Caitríona Ryan, head of access policy at the HEA; Ms Inez Bailey, CEO of the National Adult Literacy Agency, NALA; and Mr. Brian Melia, principal of Galway community college and Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board.

I draw the attention of our guests to the fact that, by virtue of section 17(2)(*l*) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. 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 outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I remind those present to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode as they interfere with the recording systems. I also advise our guests that any submissions or opening statements they make will be published on the committee website after this meeting.

Following the presentations, there will be questions from members. We must stick to a strict five-minute rule because we have a lot of witnesses to hear from this morning and it is important that we hear all of the voices. I now call on Mr. Hughes to make his opening statement.

Mr. Enda Hughes: I thank the committee for the invitation to attend in order to update it on initiatives to support Traveller participation in education. My name is Enda Hughes and I am principal officer with responsibility for equity of access in higher education. Accompanying me is Ms Patricia Sheehan, assistant principal officer in the Department's social inclusion unit.

A key objective of Traveller education policy in recent years has been the phasing out of segregated Traveller provision and the inclusion of Traveller children and young people in mainstream education. Funding for segregated Traveller provision has been incorporated into the overall school and other funding streams in order to provide supports for Traveller pupils in mainstream schools. The DEIS programme provides for smaller class sizes and other supports, including additional teaching posts, home school community liaison co-ordinators, DEIS grants, enhanced book grants, curricular supports, priority access to continued professional development and the school excellence fund-DEIS. The DEIS programme costs €125 million per year.

It is acknowledged that not all Travellers attend DEIS schools. The Department provides significant support across all schools to students with additional needs, including special education teachers, special needs assistants and school transport. The spend in this area is €1.9 billion per year, which is an increase of 52% since 2011.

The National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, works with schools and is concerned with learning behaviour and social and emotional development. Since 2011, sanctioned NEPS psychological numbers have increased significantly. In addition, all children, including Traveller children, can avail of support provided by Tusla education welfare officers regarding attendance in schools.

The Department's commitment to improving educational outcomes for Travellers and Roma is reflected in a number of key policies and initiatives, including the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy. The national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy sub-committee provides an overall focus on improving educational for Travellers and Roma, including the implementation of all education actions in the strategy, of which there are over 30. A national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy pilot project has been established in four areas in part-

nership with Tusla education support services and the Departments of Justice and Equality and the Children and Youth Affairs. This two-year pilot project will target attendance, participation and school completion in specific Traveller and Roma communities regionally in Tuam, Bunclody, Enniscorthy, Finglas, Ballymun, Coolock and Cork. Each pilot area is being provided with one additional educational welfare officer, supplied by Tusla, one additional home school liaison co-ordinator, supplied by the Department of Education and Skills, and two additional Traveller and Roma education workers, supplied by the Department of Justice and Equality. The teams will work together with parents, children, young people, schools, Traveller and Roma communities and service providers to remove the barriers impacting on Traveller and Roma children's attendance, participation and retention in education. Expected outcomes of the pilot include improved attendance, participation and retention of Travellers and Roma in education and improved engagement with Traveller representative groups. These pilots will inform the development of policy and innovative solutions to issues identified as barriers to participation and engagement.

A number of new initiatives to support increased participation in higher education by target groups, including Irish Travellers, are being rolled out across the higher education sector. They include the programme for access to higher education. In the area of higher education, the Department is seeking to ensure the implementation of the action plan to increase Traveller participation in higher education with the implementation partners, and ensure that students from the Traveller community are supported to enter and successfully participate in higher education.

While recognising the supports across the education spectrum that are in place to support Traveller participation, the purpose of the action plan is to bring a focus of attention and afford particular priority to certain actions aimed at increasing Traveller participation in higher education. While it is evident that progress is being made, we still have work to do to increase educational outcomes overall.

My colleague and I are happy to take questions from the committee on the subject.

Chairman: We will now hear from Ms Farrell and Ms McDonagh Clark.

Ms Tara Farrell: I wish the committee "Good morning," and thank members for the invitation to speak.

AONTAS is a non-governmental membership organisation established in 1969 with more than 500 members from across the lifelong learning spectrum. Our mission is to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, with a particular emphasis on those who did not benefit from education when they were young or who are underrepresented in learning. We know from the various research that low participation rates of the Traveller community in education begin at an early age and continue into adulthood.

The purpose of our submission was first to highlight the historic policy context, which is well known by members of the committee, that is, Mr. Brian Harvey's research in 2013 on the impact of spending cuts, and the 2017 ESRI report and the 2019 Joint Committee on Education and Skills report on education inequality and disadvantage and barriers to education.

In terms of broader policy context, we welcomed the 2019 EUROSTAT figures, which measure Ireland's adult learning participation rate at 12.5%. This indication of greater participation is positive but it is important to note it excludes Travellers living in Traveller-specific accommodation.

The committee will also be aware of the European Commission upskilling pathways initiative which seeks to provide new learning pathways for all citizens but with a focus identified by Government on building pathways to learning for marginalised groups, such as members of the Traveller community.

I refer to the role of community education and how it supports the equality of access to education for under-represented groups. It is a particularly effective way of engaging learners and its supportive environment increases engagement of those who have had previous negative experiences of the formal education system. Community education acts as a first step back to education where learners receive the wrap-around supports that allow them to participate fully in their learning journey.

We know the benefits of community education in terms of overcoming barriers to education and increasing well-being, and we must highlight the disproportionate cuts experienced by the sector over the last decade which curtails providers in responding effectively to the needs of their communities, particularly the Traveller community. First, we ask the joint committee to support the recommendation in this year's report of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills to support community education both through increased funding, and to achieve parity of esteem with other sectors in the formal education system.

In the context of today and our submission, we also have a small number of recommendations: to review the impact of cuts to Traveller education; to highlight the positive role models and success stories of Travellers; to address the non-education barriers to engagement, such as housing and childcare; and to support access by Travellers to accredited adult education courses.

I will hand over now to my colleague, Ms McDonagh Clark.

Ms Cathleen McDonagh Clark: I thank the committee. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the committee. I am here in my role as education and training service manager with Exchange House Ireland: National Traveller Service. Exchange House is a member organisation of AONTAS and I thank AONTAS for also highlighting the voice of our organisation specifically, and of educators working with the Traveller community more broadly.

I am passionate about education. My image of education is of keys to open doors. Education should, and must, be about unlocking human potential. When I say this, I do not mean that we will just unlock the potential of an individual, but that we can, must, and will unlock the potential of Ireland. It is a win-win situation for everybody.

As an educator working with the Traveller community and as a member of the Traveller community, I am speaking both professionally and personally. The challenges that this committee is exploring have been in existence for decades and yet have not been remedied - not without trying but still there is something missing. Educational participation rates and engagement in education remain low and this continues into employment, which has other serious consequences for many of our young people. Together we must work to ensure that the opportunities - which is the key word - available to the rest of Ireland are available to Travellers. There are practical solutions available that we all know about in order that we see change.

The first is that funding for education and the wrap-around supports like childcare, transportation, and housing must be increased and spent. As mentioned by Ms Farrell, the report of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills on the barriers to education highlights that without the

basic needs of a person being met, it is very hard for them to succeed in other areas. Looking at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it is very important to be happy.

Second, we must acknowledge and address the history on our island of prejudice toward the Traveller community. We must work, as Travellers and settled people alike, to understand each other's histories and place on this island. Without understanding our histories and ongoing discrimination that is too often based in fear or ignorance, we as educators and policymakers will not be able to believe in a different reality happening that allows for positive change. The only people that can make that reality is us and it is a win-win situation for everybody.

The third is that we must make access to education flexible and ensure that the educational opportunity is accessible and meets the needs of the communities we are serving. If we continue a system of education like we have, which is built around what makes sense on Marlborough Street and Merrion Street, then we will not succeed. We must build a system that unlocks doors for people and welcomes them inside and that always recognises the individual and what they can contribute to the community, society and our country.

I will finish now with a story of personal experience. I am a woman from the Traveller community. My parents instilled in me a passion for learning. As I grew up, I engaged with the education system and left school early, but went back to third level and did many different courses, which I will not go into now or we will be here all day.

Thankfully, my participation was supported financially. Without financial support from the State, I would not be here today and could not have afforded to have done it without it. However, the greatest barrier I faced was a system that did not see my potential. I was asked more than once why I was there. My greatest support were the people who did see my potential.

To have positive change in Ireland we need to see the potential in everyone, whether Traveller, settled, migrant, or otherwise. If we do not see and support that potential, we will do a financial and social disservice to ourselves and the country. Let this generation make a difference.

Chairman: I thank Ms McDonagh Clark for both her professional perspective and her personal story.

I call Ms Ryan to make her opening statement.

Ms Caitríona Ryan: I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for the invitation to speak here today on the topic of access to higher education and the Traveller community.

I am head of access policy at the Higher Education Authority, HEA, and I am joined by my colleague, Neil McDermott, who also works within this policy section of the HEA.

The third national plan for equity of access to higher education for 2015 to 2019 was published in December 2015. The vision of that plan is to ensure that the student body participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. The plan identifies Irish Travellers as one of the target groups that is currently under-represented in higher education. Improving participation rates in higher education for members of the Traveller community is, therefore, a priority goal for the HEA and the wider higher education sector.

In our submission to the committee, we discuss the targets set for Traveller participation in

higher education and progress to date. The progress review of the national access plan published last December showed that there were 41 Traveller students in the 2016-17 academic year. This is disappointing, given that the baseline at the commencement of the plan was 35. It is encouraging that there was a significant increase in 2017-18 to 61, but we are still some way off the target in the national access plan of 80 students by 2019. There are probably more Travellers in higher education than formally recorded but determining the actual numbers is ultimately dependent on self-identification by the students concerned.

Policy interventions and actions have been put in place to support the goals of the national access plan and in order to increase the participation rate of all plan target groups, including Irish Travellers.

As part of budgets 2016 and 2017, the Government committed €16.2 million in funding over three years for the programme for access to higher education fund, PATH. This comprises dedicated funding to support access to higher education and consists of three strands. This funding covers all target group students, which means members of the Traveller community can benefit from the range and diversity of projects funded. PATH 1 seeks to increase the number of students from under-represented groups entering initial teacher education. Our submission to the committee describes some of the projects funded under this strand and the impact they have had in respect of students from the Traveller community. The committee will be aware of the PATH 1-funded project, Tobar, arising from the meeting with Marino Institute of Education last week.

PATH 2 is the 1916 bursary fund that provides financial support to students identified by clusters of higher education institutions as being most economically disadvantaged from specified target groups. Funding of €6 million has been provided over a three-year period, commencing in 2017-18. The fund supports 200 bursaries a year with each bursary in the amount of €5,000 per annum.

As noted in our submission, students from the Traveller community have been successful in applying for bursaries. In the most recent academic year, 2018-19, 13 students from the Traveller community received bursaries from a total number of 17 who applied.

PATH 3 supports institutional capacity in developing regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education by specified groups. Funding of €7.5 million will be provided over three years to the clusters of higher education institutions. Projects with a focus on Travellers include an education programme in the mid-west cluster of institutions and a Traveller-focused work package in the south cluster. Our written submission also outlines some of the other supports available to Traveller students in higher education such as the student assistance fund.

Through their access and student support services, higher education institutions can provide support and care for all students. Our institutions are aware of the challenges faced by students from the Traveller community and all are committed not only to increase the number of Traveller students but also to ensure that the institution is a welcoming and supportive environment for them.

In addition to PATH and existing supports, the Department of Education and Skills published an action plan for increasing Traveller participation in higher education last week. The action plan will bring coherence to initiatives and will play an important role in bringing the issue of Traveller participation higher on the higher education policy agenda and monitoring

progress towards the targets set in the national action plan.

There was significant attendance from Traveller organisations at the third national access forum held in March 2019 and a Traveller student took part in a panel discussion on building partnerships and breaking down barriers. Similarly, a student success symposium held in October saw a Traveller student take part in a student-led discussion on their college experience. In 2020, the HEA will also conduct a study on mature student participation that as part of its terms of reference will examine the challenges and barriers faced by mature students who are members of the Traveller community.

The HEA recognises that members of the Traveller community are still subject to many forms of discrimination and that many have felt that higher education has not been a realistic option or pathway for them. However, the HEA is committed to working with Traveller groups, the Department of Education and Skills and our higher education system to ensure that the goals and targets for Travellers in the national access plan are achieved, and that Travellers are equitably represented in the higher education student population. The work of this committee also supports these goals and we look forward to hearing the members' views on these important matters.

Chairman: I congratulate Ms Ryan on the strategy announced last week. Some people who were meant to attend last week's committee meeting were at that launch, meaning we were in competition with each other for participants. The initiative is very welcome.

Ms Inez Bailey: NALA is grateful to the special committee for the invitation to present on adult literacy, its impact on the Traveller community and recommendations for change.

NALA is a charity that advocates for improving adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills supports. Part of our work is raising awareness of literacy and an example of this is captured in a video, the link to which was provided to members. It features Margaret Donovan from Ennis who is a member of the Traveller community and talks about her experience of returning to learning. NALA's goal is to ensure that all Travellers who want to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital skills can do so.

In Ireland, 520,000 adults, one in six or 18% of the population, find reading and understanding everyday texts difficult. This means more than 500,000 adults have difficulty reading and understanding a leaflet, bus timetable or medicine instructions. Similarly, one in four scored at the lowest level of numeracy. This equates to more than 750,000 adults not being able to do basic calculations such as dividing up a bill. For the Traveller community the literacy issue is even starker with an estimated half of Travellers having poor functional literacy.

Unmet adult literacy and numeracy needs have devastating consequences for individuals, communities and the economy. They are a factor in social exclusion and inequality. The World Literacy Foundation states that the people who live with literacy needs "are faced with the prospect of poor health outcomes, welfare dependency, a lack of social cohesion, a higher level of crime and lack of self worth. Poor literacy also limits a person's ability to engage in activities that require either critical thinking or a solid base of literacy and numeracy skills."

Low literacy is costing our society and economy in terms of poorer health, productivity, weak employment and earning potential, welfare dependency, less involvement in society as well as intergenerational disadvantage for children and families. It is time to invest in people who have not benefited from our education system during the bust or boom. It is time to pri-

oritise the furthest behind first.

UNICEF states that Travellers are still falling between the cracks, with the vast majority of Travellers ceasing education before junior certificate level. Pavee Point's submission to this committee highlights the grave educational disadvantages experienced by the Traveller community including the following: Only 13% of Travellers complete secondary education in comparison to 92% of the general population; 28% of Travellers leave school before the age of 13 compared to 1% of general population; the majority of Traveller children live in families where the mother has either no formal education or primary education only; and half of Travellers have poor functional literacy.

Since the economic crash in 2008, specific supports for Traveller education have been withdrawn and the focus was to mainstream Travellers into the education system. In 2016, the European Commission assessment of Ireland stated:

> A mainstreamed approach is only sufficient when outcomes are identical for all components of the target groups; when evidence shows a clear gap between the situation of Roma and Travellers versus the rest of society policies should be adjusted and specific measures should also be developed.

A 2017 ESRI report entitled, A Social Portrait of Irish Travellers, noted that "the depth of educational disadvantage experienced by Travellers means that specific, targeted additional supports will be required in order for them to participate in mainstream education on equal terms". Last Tuesday, the Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills, who has responsibility for higher education, Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor, launched the Action Plan to Promote Traveller Participation in Higher Education. While welcome, we also need a broader action plan for Traveller education in further education and training.

The adult skills survey is entitled the programme for the international assessment of adult competencies, PIAAC, which provides the most up-to-date statistics on the adult literacy and numeracy skills levels of those of working age since the most recent survey in 1997. Back then, the poor results for Ireland propelled significant action that saw annual increases in participation and resources for the next decade. However, since 2009, and despite the very disappointing results of PIAAC in 2013, investment and participation rates have stagnated.

Ireland's first national skills strategy set the target to reduce the numbers of adults with less than upper secondary education to 7% by 2020. While its school and higher education performance targets were reached or surpassed, we failed to reach the low skills target. The same target was rolled over into the current national skills strategy to be achieved by 2020 along with the same approach. With 12.4% of persons aged between 15 and 64 in employment having less than upper secondary education, this target will not be reached again. This fact alone illustrates the inadequacy of the approach and resources to tackle the scale of the adult literacy and numeracy issue in Ireland. There remains an outdated view that this challenge will fade with time based on school attendance. In reality, there is a crisis in the learning outcomes for many in society, in particular in the Traveller community. We acknowledge the contribution of the Department of Education and Skills and the Educational and Training Boards Ireland that cater for more than 60,000 participants in adult literacy services, costing less than €600 per person but it is clear that we need a better resourced and co-ordinated effort by Government.

Currently, NALA is working bilaterally with nine Departments and their agencies on policies aimed at building literacy and numeracy competence across a number of areas, including health and finance. This experience, along with similar recent developments to address the

literacy issue in The Netherlands, Portugal, Finland and Belgium, has guided NALA to call for a whole-of-Government approach that would bring a co-ordinated national effort to radically reducing the numbers of people with literacy and numeracy needs. This should include an action plan for Traveller education in further education and training, in partnership with national Traveller organisations.

Literacy is a barometer of equality and changes lives. Ireland can do better to give everyone a fair chance to thrive in their literacy development. This requires investing in people who have not benefited from our education system to date. That requires greater prioritisation within the Department of Education and Skills of adult literacy and better alignment of policies and strategies across different Departments.

I thank the members for listening. Our written submission has more detail on our vision for literacy.

Chairman: I thank Ms Bailey for highlighting the importance of further education as well as higher education as part of the pathways of access to education by Travellers. I invite Mr. Melia to make his opening statement.

Mr. Brian Melia: On behalf of Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI, and the 16 education and training boards, ETBs, that ETBI represents, I am very pleased to make this statement to the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community to contribute to the review of Traveller issues.

ETBs are statutory authorities which have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate community national schools, second-level schools, further education colleges, and a range of adult and further education centres in communities throughout Ireland.

ETBs have a long-standing tradition of supporting the educational development of members of the Traveller community. As State schools, ETB schools are open to all pupils regardless of any aspect of their identity, the culture of which is underpinned by the core values of excellence in education, care, equality, community and multi-denominational.

In preparation, and to inform this submission to the committee, ETBI references the views and experiences of directors of schools, directors of further education and the training and ETB school management.

Education and training boards provide access to a range of education programmes in both the post-primary and further education and training sectors as part of its broad educational provision and prioritises delivering a responsive educational service to members of the Traveller community as a significant target group, particularly at further education level. ETBs have a long-standing tradition of supporting the educational development of all members of the community, regardless of ethnic or cultural background. As State schools, ETB schools are open to all pupils regardless of any aspect of their identity.

At post-primary level, research in the education sector has long reflected the importance of family engagement in education as a driver of improved student achievement, reduced absenteeism and raised expectations for parents and guardians. Positive connections between family, community and school supports provide for greater engagement with formal schooling, leading to a positive impact on access and retention rates.

These research findings have been demonstrated in our response from schools with Traveller students, who have highlighted the perceived low status of the benefit of education and the Traveller parents' and guardians' negative experience of schools as key influencers of low participation rates. Often challenged by the complexities of the formal school system and engaging with school authorities, parents and guardians of Traveller students frequently disengage from an environment that is more often than not perceived to be outside their comfort zone.

Separately, it was noted by schools in our sector that the loss of the visiting teacher for Travellers service in recent years has further compounded the communication challenges and opportunities for meaningful connections, which had been embedded and valued. While we acknowledge the abolition may have been in line with the Department of Education and Skills policy of phasing out segregated Traveller provision, elements of the support provisions - access, participation and outcomes - remain key priority challenges.

While many schools, including those in the ETB sector, have access to a range of supports, including those specifically under the general allocation model for special education needs, these supports need to go beyond this model. Supports and resources, particularly those which align to the principles and practice of inter-cultural education and subsequently extend to initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning and development, are vital.

At further education and training, FET, level, the delivery of education and training boards is guided by the Solas FET strategy. Active inclusion is a key element of the strategy, with the FET sector seeking to increase levels through the provision of high-quality, more accessible and flexible education, training and skill development interventions and supports suited to the individual. In the upskilling pathways recommendation, members of the Traveller community have been identified as a priority group, benefittng from assistance in helping members to acquire a broader set of skills. Tuition is offered on a full-time or part-time basis, with flexible options offered in regard to time, duration and location. At this level, tutors and support personnel involved in the provision of direct tuition and aligned support and guidance can themselves avail of ongoing professional development, including diversity training.

Our written submission refers to current figures relating to Traveller participation in ETB further education and training programmes. While the data are based on self-disclosure of ethnicity and may not be fully reflective of all Traveller participation, they do give some indication of participation levels to date. The national programme and learner support system, PLSS, records information on learners enrolled in ETB programmes. The data indicate that Youthreach participation, in particular, presents an attractive option for young adult members of the Traveller community.

Barriers to participation in further education and training are documented in the SOLAS report of 2017. Some of those noted – low confidence and low self-esteem, a negative experience of education and a lack of awareness – are evident in, but not exclusive to, the Traveller community.

ETBI has noted that a revised strategy on Traveller education needs to be cognisant of the cultural, specific and organic nature of school and societal environments relating to Traveller inclusion, and we have made several proposals and recommendations aligned to these priorities in our written submission.

We thank the committee for inviting ETBI to engage with it on these issues and affording us the opportunity to reflect the varying impacts and experiences of the ETB sector.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I have a couple of questions, mostly for Ms Ryan, Ms Bailey and either Mr. Hughes or Ms Sheehan. I will start with Ms Ryan.

I remember that there was funding available a few years ago, and colleges were only going to be able to access a particular fund based on how well they were doing in terms of their access rates. Is there is still a tie between university funding and access? If so, do we need to dig down further into it and have a specific funding stream for Traveller access? Some universities get access right and some do not. People have the idea that access is just about getting a place but that is very much not the case. Ms McDonagh spoke about having the financial support at third level to be able to complete an education. How do we measure access in each university? How do we audit it? How do we judge whether a university is actually providing access from the point of walking in the door until the point of completing a degree, including a Master's degree, or a PhD, such that the access heading follows the student right through the education system? It would mean that irrespective of the supports the student needs, be they financial, emotional, familial, social or cultural, the access package should be much wider than one that just implies the granting of a place in university, which is somehow seen as an access route.

A few years ago, perhaps when I was on the board of Trinity College, funding was tied to access. I cannot really remember what the path was. Could Ms Ryan clarify that?

My next question is for Mr. Hughes or Ms Sheehan. I remember reading the report of the committee on educational disadvantage that was set up years ago within the Department. The report was not taken on board at the time. I believe Ms Ann Louise Gilligan may have been the chairman of the committee, group or task force at the time. DEIS came into existence as it was being disbanded. Many will say I am wrong but I believe the evidence will start to come out over the next few years that DEIS, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, has failed. The purpose of DEIS was to narrow the gap between disadvantaged and better-off communities. Although literacy and numeracy has increased, it has increased at a national rate. If working class and settled kids are failed by DEIS in terms of third level progression, how can we do a review of the system to ensure it can be enhanced and more robust? If we are looking at access right from birth, do we need a DEIS system where the supports follow children and are relative to the situation of particular minority groups or families? Do we need to get down much more to the actual individual supports of DEIS rather than only the school supports? Sometimes DEIS supports get spread out in a such a way that the kids who most need support do not actually get it.

Every year I attend the Education World Forum for education ministers. Ireland has failed to be represented at it because it does not take up the invite. I have learned much about access to education from ministers around the world over two days. One year I sat on a panel with Eric Hanushek who wrote *Education Quality and Economic Growth*. As Ms Bailey said, it comes back to bad literacy rates being an indicator of inequality levels. Eric Hanushek presented his research and showed how countries with a higher rate of GDP *per capita* also have higher literacy and numeracy rates. Instead of looking at smaller plasters to solve problems, is the Department looking at increasing GDP *per capita* if we want to address inequality and educational disadvantage?

Ms Bailey gave the figures for literacy as a whole. Has there ever been a Traveller-specific survey carried out? Whatever funds are set aside for literacy as a whole, there is no real understanding of how much of that is targeted towards actual communities rather than just individuals struggling with literacy.

Ms Caitríona Ryan: The Higher Education Authority, HEA, pays a core grant to all institutions. In that core grant, there is an extra weighting for all students who come into the institution from the national access target groups. That would include Travellers and would be an extra 33% on the standard funding for every student. That funding follows the student throughout his or her higher education journey, from first year to completion. That supports the institution in putting in place the pre-entry and, most important, the post-entry supports to help the student through the system. This ensures whatever supports, be they academic or social, are in place to enable them to complete successfully. Access is about retention and completion too.

Within the national access plan, there is an objective about student success. The completion rates for students from the target groups are somewhat lower – but only marginally lower - than completion rates more generally. We chair a student success working group which comprises representatives and stakeholders throughout the sector. We work closely with the national forum for teaching and learning to identify what works for student success, particularly for the target groups, identifying good practice and how can it be shared across the system and put in place in other institutions.

We had a student success symposium in October at which we brought together students and listened to the student voice as to what works and what initiatives are supporting students to successful completion. Traveller students were very much part of that symposium, both in the audience and panel-led discussions.

In addition to the core funding and student success initiatives, all institutions would have an access infrastructure in place. That access infrastructure also manages the financial supports as well as the other supports and the student assistance fund. That is available to all students, particularly students from the target groups. The path 1 bursaries are also available to students to apply for, and Traveller students have a very high success rate in securing those bursaries when they apply. The other path funding to which I referred is an additional funding stream for institutions to put in place both pre-entry and post-entry supports such that there is a holistic perspective on access, not just getting through the door of the institution.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I refer not to the bursaries as such but difficulties or barriers that have come up in the first year in respect of progression of students who are in path 1 funding. The Irish language has proved in the first year to be a barrier to moving students straight towards the teaching profession to help diversify the profession. They are ending up having to take on, say, arts degrees instead of primary education degrees. Are some of these issues being addressed? There are still massive barriers for students who are in path 1 funding. They should be seen as access students but the standard of Irish in the end-of-year test in some of the universities is posing a huge barrier. It is an even greater standard than that which would have been required of them had they gone off their leaving certificate Irish results. Is Ms Ryan aware of any of those complications that have come up?

Ms Caitríona Ryan: Path 1 is particular in that it involves access to initial teacher education. Primary teaching has a specific Irish requirement, and that is a barrier for some students from the target groups. A lot of the path 1 funding has been directed at putting in academic supports quite early on in the second level cycle to enable students to reach the entry standard required. We are conducting a review of path 1. It is now into its third year of operation and we will submit a report on its initial years to the Department early in the new year. Some of the issues to which Senator Ruane referred may come up in that.

Ms Patricia Sheehan: I take on board the comments Senator Ruane made about the edu-

cational disadvantage task force but, overall, DEIS is seen to be making improvements. We acknowledge, however, that in the area of Traveller outcomes and education we need to do an awful lot more.

My colleague, Mr. Hughes, mentioned the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy, NTRIS, pilots. We see huge potential in those in identifying the barriers and coming up with solutions to them. As Mr. Hughes mentioned, the pilot is in four areas and has been established in three of them. Within the three areas we cannot say at this stage what the level of participation of Traveller students will be but it has the potential to reach more than 1,000 students. We have 679 children enrolled in the schools in the three pilot areas established. The one that is not established yet is Cork. In Galway, Dublin and Wexford there are 679 students at primary level and 341 pupils at post-primary level, so the reach to those families, to the children and their parents, will be fairly substantial.

Regarding the scope of the project, with the teams working together, we have very firmly set guidelines on what should be done. There is a national pilot oversight group, and in each area there will be a local pilot steering group which will identify its local needs and come up with its local plan. It is very much a matter of developing relationships with local and Traveller communities; working with schools to address and identify the in-school barriers to attendance and participation; working with parents to support their children's participation in school; encouraging and supporting attendance in early-years services; liaising with statutory, community and voluntary services to enhance attendance, participation and retention; supporting the children in transitions from preschool to primary, post-primary and on to junior cycle and transitions into further and higher education; developing a local action plan, as I mentioned, informed by local data and identified needs; working with partner Departments to share the learning outcomes of the programme; being flexible and creative in developing innovative approaches to supporting Traveller and Roma attendance, participation and retention; and exploring and collaborating with other community and statutory initiatives that can support the programme, such as DEIS initiatives or, for example, the Yellow Flag programme.

Within the project, universal interventions will be available to all pupils along with target interventions for specific individual pupils or groups of pupils. It is envisaged that the majority of Traveller and Roma children enrolled in the schools will interact with the universal interventions. The pilot project is being evaluated. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs has commissioned research. The first strand of that is to gather baseline information on the position in these areas, very much focusing on qualitative research, interviews with parents, schools and pupils. Part of that research will involve researchers working with local pilot teams to develop instruments for how they will measure success and monitor the project. How does one measure engagement or a sense of belonging? That research will inform, at an early stage, where the Department needs to provide further investment and determine what are the issues We see it allowing for greater dialogue between schools, students and parents to try to build trust, gain an understanding of what is happening to prevent children progressing and then inform the Department when it takes policy actions to address issues.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I am sorry, I have one more point.

Chairman: We need to hear from other people as well

Senator Lynn Ruane: I emphasise that the aim of DEIS was to narrow the gap. Even though we see successes with more kids completing the leaving certificate, which I do not deny, we must always refocus on the fact that inequality has increased. We need a DEIS system to

narrow that gap, not one that sees it widen over the years. That is my main point. DEIS is failing. We see progression to leaving certificate but it is not narrowing the gap and that is where we need to remain focused. I welcome the pilot programme and wish it every success.

Ms Patricia Sheehan: I thank the Senator for that contribution. I also point out that approximately 50% of Travellers are in non-DEIS schools and a factor of the pilot is that non-DEIS schools are included.

Senator Lynn Ruane: That is why I said that DEIS should possibly follow some children instead of the school.

Chairman: A question was put to Ms Bailey. She mentioned Yellow Flag and Tobar. Both presented to us last week and said that they were worthwhile initiatives that were funded on a wing and a prayer. We are alive to the fact that the Department is mentioning them as positives but that they are not on a secure footing.

Ms Inez Bailey: There has not been a specific adult literacy survey for the Traveller community. The most recent data we were able to find were in the Traveller health study provided by the Department of Health. I presume, since the Department is so concerned about the health outcomes for the Traveller community that it recognises adult literacy and numeracy issues as a major barrier to better health. We are supportive of the idea of trying to get data. Similar to what we heard from the HEA, the data have driven the action plan for Travellers in higher education. We think that if there were data on the levels of adult literacy among the adult Traveller community, it would be informative for an action plan for adult Travellers in further education and training.

Chairman: That is something that we can take up in a recommendation.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I acknowledge the contributions from the various representatives and organisations present. There is a lot of work going into improving educational opportunities across all sectors, including disadvantaged people and the Traveller community. If one goes back to the facts that the Chair stated at the outset, it is disappointing that we are not achieving the learning outcomes that we would like. We need to drill down into why that is happening. I know that some recommendations and points have been raised today about how we should address that. The main message that I am getting is about opportunity, removal of barriers and supports. Those are the three aspects that are needed to help the Traveller community, which we are addressing specifically today, to improve its learning outcomes.

I have questions for Mr. Hughes from the Department. I acknowledge the policy of the Department whereby all educational supports have been mainstreamed for those who are disadvantaged. I welcome the pilots that he mentioned. Outside of those, has there been a specific evaluation to measure the impact of educational supports for Traveller children since the change was made? It was a substantial change. I understand why it was made and I acknowledge the supports that were provided through DEIS schools, some of which are in my own area. The DEIS school is a kind of catch-all. Many people benefit from being in such a school who may not need the benefit while many who are not in them fall through the net. While the intention is good, there is a lot of space for people to fall through the net in the education system. An evaluation of that is required because the facts and statistics speak for themselves. People are falling through the net. I would be interested to hear a response.

I presume the pilot schemes that were mentioned are a hybrid whereby the mainstream sup-

ports are maintained but there is a lack of learning outcomes or lack of educational attainment, and I am speaking specifically about Traveller education, and the intention is the pilot schemes would address that through additional resources. The witnesses might clarify that point. If it is the case, I am not sure why we need the pilot schemes because we are hearing already what the statistics are and we hearing from those like NALA and AONTAS where the problems and the barriers are. We should do the pilots and learn from them, but the information is available, with due respect, and if it is, why are we not taking the recommendations?

I commend the Government announcement this week on access to higher education for the Traveller community. However, there is a significant omission, which is also noted in the contributions today from the ETBs and NALA, that there is no action plan for further education and training. I would have thought that should come first, before higher education. With due respect to higher education, I came through the ETB system and think it is a fabulous system in every single community in the country, whereas higher education is a step further away. Having come through the system, I went on to further education and higher education. We should start by prioritising need, and further education and training would seem an obvious place to start to assist people in the Traveller community who may need to go on.

We are not all academics and that is a big problem. We are funnelling all our young people into academia, when there are major opportunities in the vocational system. I want to know from the Department why we do not have an action plan in that area.

Ms Patricia Sheehan: In regard to the pilots, in addition to the mainstream, there is the additional team comprising an additional home school community liaison officer, an education welfare officer and two Traveller workers from the Traveller and Roma communities, who will engage with parents, encourage participation and do a lot of work on linkages. That team is a significant resource in addition to what is in place.

The Senator is correct that we know progress has not been made. However, we need to be very clear what appropriate supports need to be put in place to make improvements. A lot of work is ongoing on the barriers that exist and the Chairman mentioned the issue of reduced timetables. Is it appropriate to respond to that now?

Chairman: Yes, but briefly. I am anxious that all members get a chance to ask questions.

Ms Patricia Sheehan: Our position on reduced timetables is that every child enrolled in a school should attend for the full school day and the Department is seeking to put in place a robust set of guidelines that outline procedures to be followed by schools, which we expect will commence in the next school term in January. The issue of reduced timetables has not been reported, so we are not able to monitor use at this stage. The first step is that the guidelines are going to address that and there will be mandatory reporting by schools to the Tusla educational support service. We will then be able to monitor and ascertain their use and it is anticipated that it will reduce situations where it is being used inappropriately.

There have been consultations with stakeholders in that regard and, when they are completed, the guidelines will be finalised. There have also been consultations with the Traveller groups on this, and a draft of the guidelines was sent for feedback. Progress is being made on that and it is hoped it will be finalised before Christmas.

Chairman: Senator Coffey asked specifically about an action plan on further education and other members asked about community education. What is Ms Sheehan's commentary on this

as well as on welcoming these steps in higher education?

Ms Patricia Sheehan: With regard to further education, the recently available figure for learners who identified as Travellers is approximately 1,200 but the figure could be higher because of the requirement to self-identify. ETBs report to SOLAS annually on their plans for provision to identify priority cohorts, including Travellers, through the funding streams. There are a number of initiatives and supports to try to ensure equal opportunities for Travellers in the further education strategy and in SOLAS's plans. They include the use of a dual approach of mainstream and tailored provision for engagement of Travellers,; developing the delivery of programmes specifically tailored and targeted at identified cohorts of Travellers, for example, Traveller men or women or young Travellers; close co-operation with local Traveller representative groups and community groups, with particular success reported with regard to engagement with Traveller women groups; and using an interagency approach by collaborating with stakeholders to develop partnerships to identify needs and implement strategies to increase access opportunities for Travellers and promote awareness of further education and training in the Traveller community.

Senator Paudie Coffey: This is a very important point because the statistics Ms Sheehan cited show there is an element of success in further training and education in the vocational system. For this reason, we should prioritise and focus on where we can achieve maximum success. We should have an action plan for higher education. We need community modules. The ETB system is in every community in the country and the ETB representative can speak for himself. I served on a vocational board for many years. ETBs are in every community and they are standing by to assist, if given the resources to do so. For this reason, I cannot understand why we do not have specific targeted resources for ETBs to assist in Traveller education. Going back to the olden days when we had the group certificate, people who did not want to do the leaving certificate had a step so they could transfer to an apprenticeship or training. We see the great work being done by the Department on apprenticeships in so many areas. We do not have just the traditional craft apprenticeships. The answers are here in front of us. We just need joined-up thinking from the Department to work with the organisations and just do it. The network is there. The skilled people in the ETBs are there. The Traveller community is struggling but we have the ETBs on our doorstep and we are not utilising them. We need an action plan in this area before we start to speak about all of the other complexities.

Mr. Brian Melia: I would hate to think I sat here and watched the past ten years of my life as a DEIS principal disappearing, having been described as failed but I support some of the other comments that were made. With regard to the failure of DEIS, we know the graphs for adult literacy and numeracy have risen in parallel and it is not a diversion model. While nationally we are showing good success in the increase in literacy and numeracy, DEIS schools have shown excellent success in remaining parallel with the graph. The nail has been hit on the head with regard to individual support. The support must follow the child regardless of what school the child goes to, DEIS or non-DEIS. The designation of a DEIS school needs to be looked at by the Department. I agree that DEIS supports are very good and we have run very successful schools. My school has 135 members of the Traveller community and we are proud of them all. We have shown very good progression but-----

Senator Lynn Ruane: What is the progression level of the 135 Travellers?

Mr. Brian Melia: This year, six students went on to third level. I am proud to that 95% of the students in first year, second year and third year will complete their junior certificate.

Senator Lynn Ruane: That is not good enough. I am sorry but we cannot say it is not a failed system when that is the bar.

Mr. Brian Melia: DEIS is not a catch-all.

Chairman: I ask Mr Melia to address the points-----

Senator Lynn Ruane: Apologies, but it is just-----

Chairman: -----made by Senator Coffey on the role of the ETBs.

Mr. Brian Melia: With regard to their role, if we are looking at supports, we were a DEIS school in 2010 and we are still a DEIS school. DEIS home school liaison supports were provided to us, as previously mentioned. The major resource we lost is 1.5 hours per student. This means the loss of a huge number of teachers in a school such as ours who served the Traveller community and served all children equally.

There is a barrier in further education in that the person has to self-identify as a Traveller. The work experience element is also an issue in that all students have work experience in further education. Whether we like it or not, there is a barrier in this area and, thus, a discrimination against Travellers entering the workforce and it needs to be addressed. It is fair to say that further education and apprenticeships are employment-led in providing employment for people. To pursue an apprenticeship, a person must be registered for an apprenticeship scheme.

Chairman: There is no reason mainstream funding and specific supports cannot be targeted at DEIS schools. It should not be either-or.

Mr. Brian Melia: Absolutely.

Chairman: We have got into a binary way of thinking. As stated by Senator Ruane, we have to face the fact that we have a failed system in respect of Travellers. The facts speak for themselves. It is not that efforts are not being made; it is that they are not working or not working fast enough. We cannot get away from that. The next speaker is Deputy O'Loughlin, who will be followed by Deputy Joan Collins.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: My apologies for not being present for the opening statements. The education committee has done a great deal of work on the rights to education and access to education for vulnerable people, including a session on Traveller children. Senator Ruane and I take great pride in the committee's work, which shone a light on the issue of reduced timetables. I welcome what the Department is doing to follow up on that issue. The engagement we had following publication of the interim report indicated that the issue would be grasped once and for all. As mentioned, one of the key issues was the lack of monitoring of reduced timetables. We had only anecdotal evidence in that regard but we had heard from representatives of Traveller groups about how they are negatively impacted in regard to reduced timetables. The commentary from the witnesses in this regard is welcome news.

On the basics of education, in this country every child has a right to an education. However, it must be recognised that not every child is equal before he or she starts education. We need to put in place measures and supports to level the playing field. We hear much about equality of opportunity. As mentioned at a previous meeting of this committee, this is not about equality of opportunity; it is about the equality of the conditions surrounding the young person who is presenting.

Chairman: I must ask the Deputy to put a question. We are stuck for time because the Minister is due before the committee at 12.30 p.m.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: My apologies, I was not aware of that. I support the DEIS scheme. It is a very good scheme but I believe it needs to be tweaked and there should be dedicated teachers for Travellers. I know from my engagement with principals and teachers in schools that lost this vital service that they believe this does not serve Traveller children well. There is need for additional supports alongside the DEIS scheme. I do not believe one should replace the other. Should consideration be given to having different levels of disadvantage? It is important that the focus is not on blanket disadvantage because different groups of people and children experience different levels of disadvantage. We also need supports for non-formal education. Non-formal activities play as important a role as formal education in supporting vulnerable education users.

Chairman: The Deputy's question is relevant to the Department and the community education sector. I invite Ms Sheehan to respond first.

Ms Patricia Sheehan: I thank the Deputy for her question. Major investment has gone into the new special education model for the allocation of teachers. That commenced fully this year, but was piloted in the two years prior to that. More than €1.9 billion has been invested, which is an increase of 52% since 2011. Many supports are going into schools and it is important that we look to see and be sure about how those supports are being utilised. Schools need to be able to cater for the diverse cohorts of children now entering. We are increasingly moving away from segregation and towards trying to ensure that teacher capacity exists. Initial teacher education will focus on preparing teachers to meet the needs of all children in schools, including Traveller children. We also want to ensure that continuous professional development, CPD, will be examined as well.

Touching on Senator Coffey's point regarding further education, I should have mentioned that there is an investment of approximately €800 million in that sector in literacy and numeracy. We have an education sub-committee within the national Traveller Roma inclusion strategy, NTRIS, which has representatives from all the different elements of the Department, from early years to further and higher education, as well the Traveller representative groups. That education sub-committee is committed to implementing the 31 actions in NTRIS, which are across the life cycle. A number of those actions concern further education, while some 15 or 16 others relate to primary and post-primary education. We are going to work on that with Traveller groups in January 2020 in respect of setting indicators and on having an implementation plan.

We had a meeting with the group, which brought SOLAS and the ETB in to meet the Traveller representative groups some months ago. We will also follow up on that meeting. Regarding a plan, all of the actions within NTRIS cover many of these issues. They may not make specific identification, but they are broad enough to identify where there are further needs and where we need to be addressing and directing our investment.

Chairman: NTRIS has been doing that since 2017 and we are now in 2019. Only another two years remain, so we need to ensure those actions in NTRIS are being progressed.

Ms Patricia Sheehan: They are being progressed.

Chairman: We have heard a litany of comments regarding good ideas but failed delivery regarding Traveller education. I call Ms Farrell to respond.

Ms Tara Farrell: We have heard a great deal about access. To echo the point made by Senator Ruane, there is no homogeneous group of marginalised learners who all have the same access issues. Regarding community providers, I work in a community education setting where there are a wide range of access issues. Those can include geography, childcare, finance or a person's previous negative experiences of the formal education system. This is where community education has a major role to play, because community education providers understand the needs within their communities. They are, unfortunately, greatly under-resourced.

Picking up on the point made by Senator Coffey, let us not reinvent the wheel as many answers exist. I referred already to the report of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills on education inequality. If some of those measures were implemented, that would address many of these issues. I say that because community education providers need the resources to be able to support learners. I will finish with a quick point. Aontas is celebrating being in existence for 50 years this year. We had a lifelong learning summit in Croke Park some weeks ago. One of the key points that came out of one of our discussions was the notion of the hard-to-reach learner. Many of our learners are telling us that they are not hard to reach, they are just not being listened to. That is a really important point and that is where initiatives, such as the community education network, are so important to support learners in having their say and strengthening their voices. The community education providers need to be resourced to do so.

Deputy Joan Collins: Time is short. I have two questions. A number of people have identified the fact that the visiting teachers were important and played a key role in liaising with families, with getting children into school and then progressing them. How much has the loss of those visiting teachers impacted on children from the community in the form of not attending school, dropping out early and not going past primary level? The Department's pilot scheme deals with some of that through the school liaison office, but that is only a pilot scheme. It is almost ten years since cuts were made to Traveller education funding. How much has that affected Travellers? Is there a need to reintroduce those liaison teachers? I have another question for the Department on the issue of educational welfare officers, EWOs. We do not have an EWO in my area of Dublin 12 because no replacement was provided when the officer went on maternity leave. There is no officer in Lucan either. Are there enough EWOs at present? Are they embedded in communities? I ask the departmental officials to tell us exactly how many EWOs are employed and where they are located.

Ms Patricia Sheehan: Following reorganisation and the establishment of what is known as the Tusla education support service, the visiting teacher scheme, the home school community liaison scheme and school completion programme are part of that service now. The visiting teacher scheme was disbanded in line with the introduction of the mainstreaming policy but the home school community liaison officers would have taken up the role of the visiting teacher in DEIS schools. The EWOs are under the remit of Tusla education support service, which is the responsibility of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. I am not, therefore, in a position to answer the Deputy's questions on EWOs.

Chairman: While we are waiting for the Minister to arrive, I invite members to ask questions of our witnesses.

Senator Lynn Ruane: We must address the fact that the Department of Education and Skills cannot comment on the Educational Welfare Service. That is a serious issue. Does Ms Sheehan believe that this service should not have been taken out of the Department? Does she think it should be returned? The relationship between Tusla and many families in communities of high deprivation, particularly the Traveller community, is quite fractious. Traveller families

have had a negative experience with bodies such as Tusla and may have a more positive attitude to the EWO if it were under the remit of the Department. Does Ms Sheehan think the decision should be revised?

Ms Patricia Sheehan: I am afraid that is something I cannot comment on because it is a policy matter.

Senator Lynn Ruane: Would it be of benefit to her as an assistant principal officer in the Department to have control over a particular part of her brief?

Ms Patricia Sheehan: That is very much a policy question but what I can say is that we work very closely with the Tusla education support service. Tusla is leading the pilot programmes on the ground and there is significant collaboration between them and us. I cannot comment on the Senator's broader question, which relates to Government policy.

Chairman: It is my understanding that there will be four pilot programmes. Is there any data on how many schools Travellers are attending throughout the country?

Ms Patricia Sheehan: In the three pilot areas that have been established, we are talking about approximately 60 schools. The Cork piece is being finalised at the moment

Chairman: To clarify, four out of the 60 schools where Travellers are attending will be covered by the pilots. Is that correct?

Ms Patricia Sheehan: No. There are 60 schools in three of the pilot areas. We could be talking about approximately 70 schools being involved in the pilot.

Chairman: I thank Ms Sheehan. I welcome the Minister and thank him for being with us this morning. I now invite him to make his opening statement.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I apologise for being late; I have just come from a Cabinet meeting. I thank the Chairman for her ongoing commitment to the issues of Traveller culture and education. I also thank her for her engagement on these matters in the Seanad, which is both positive and helpful in the context of my own deliberations. The Minister of State, Deputy Mitchell O'Connor will focus on the higher level sector.

Chairman: My apologies - I also welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Mitchell O'Connor and thank her for being here.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I also thank the committee members for giving me the opportunity to appear before them to discuss education and the Traveller community. As members can see from the detailed submission provided by the Department, several initiatives are under way to improve educational outcomes for Travellers at all levels. Part of this process includes identifying and addressing barriers to participation and engagement by Travellers in education. One of these barriers is the practice of operating reduced timetables. This issue is also being discussed at the Joint Committee on Education and Skills and I would like to acknowledge that committee's work on the matter. My Department has been working with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla education support service in drawing up guidelines, which will require schools to notify Tusla when a reduced timetable is proposed. This will help to ensure that reduced timetables will be limited to those circumstances where they are appropriate.

I fully support actions to improve educational outcomes for Travellers, which include ensuring that the school setting is a more welcoming environment. I agree with the principles un-

derlying the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018 proposed by the Chairman to provide for the inclusion of Traveller culture and history in the curriculum taught by recognised schools in the State. Recognising and respecting Traveller culture and history ensures that we can build relationships based on trust, respect and understanding across all cultures.

Officials of my Department participate in the steering group that was established to oversee the development and implementation of the national Traveller and Roma integration strategy, NTRIS, published in 2017. This strategy provides a framework for interventions across a range of Departments, including education, which is reflected in more than 30 education actions from early years to adult education. We recognise that Traveller and Roma communities need more focused interventions to drive improvements in educational outcomes. A pilot project has been established to develop innovative approaches to addressing issues that are impeding educational attainment for this reason.

In the areas of further and higher education, upon which the Minister of State will expand, through the further education strategy and the national plan for equity of access to higher education, we are working to break down the barriers for target groups to enrol in and complete their chosen area of study. A progress review of the plan led to the recently published Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019-2021. As part of the annual further education and training service planning process between SOLAS and the ETBs are now required to consider the needs of a broad range of learners and disadvantaged groups, including Travellers, in their planning and delivery of further education and training.

I acknowledge that educational outcomes for Travellers fall short of what they should be but progress is being made, as evidenced in the roll-out of the NTRIS pilot projects and the progress report on the action plan for equity of access to higher education and we will continue to build upon this. A lot of work is ongoing in the Department to address the needs of the Traveller community. To achieve better outcomes for Traveller students, all stakeholders including parents, educators and Traveller representative groups, need to work together to overcome the barriers that limit educational achievement. I assure the committee that my Department is taking every action necessary to improve educational outcomes for Travellers.

Chairman: I thank the Minister for that statement and invite the Minister of State to make her opening statement to the committee. We are delighted to have a Minister and a Minister of State here today, which indicates that the Department takes this issue seriously.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): I thank the Chairman and committee for their invitation to attend to discuss the issue of Traveller participation in higher education. Our third national access plan for equity of access to higher education sets out our current strategy to address under-representation in higher education by groups identified in the plan. The plan identifies Irish Travellers as one of the target groups that is currently under-represented in higher education. Members should note that the plan runs from 2015 to 2019. Following the publication of the current national access plan, NAP, the Department launched PATH. This funding stream enables innovative approaches to support the delivery of targets in the national access plan. PATH's main objective is to increase participation in higher education by our national access plan target groups, including the Traveller community. Each of the three new PATH funding strands is expected to have a positive impact on Traveller numbers in higher education. The three PATH funding streams will help us to better understand and address the barriers to access to higher education for Travellers. The feedback from students supported by PATH is positive.

A progress review of the NAP published last year extended the lifetime of the plan to 2021. This will enable us to gather data under our data plan so that we can make informed decisions regarding the next NAP. The progress review illustrated that even though there were increases in participation of Travellers in higher education, there remains quite a task ahead to meet the access target, which is a modest target set in the plan. The baseline of just 35 Traveller students in higher education has increased to 61 in 2017 to 2018. This is still short of the target of 80, which we will seek to achieve before the end of the current plan in 2021. Self-identification is the only method by which information on Traveller participation in higher education can be gathered. In this regard, the progress review highlighted that the number of Traveller students in higher education may be higher than officially recorded, as some Traveller students have chosen not to self-identify. That in itself shows a fear among some Travellers about declaring their membership of the Traveller community. This is despite the fact, as I know, that they are very proud to be part of the Traveller tradition.

Arising from the progress review published in 2018, priority actions were published in the action plan for education in 2019 and a commitment was made to the development of an action plan for increasing Traveller participation in higher education. Following a consultation process, I launched the action plan for increasing Traveller participation in higher education last week in Technological University Dublin. The purpose of the action plan is to bring a particular focus of attention and afford particular priority to certain actions. Its overall objective is to advance Traveller participation in higher education within the context of approaches on retention and transition of Travellers across the education spectrum.

Progress has been made on increasing participation in higher education by under-represented target groups. However, we are placing a particular focus on Traveller participation in higher education to ensure we meet the NAP target for this key under-represented group by 2021. It is intended that the various initiatives under the strands of the programme for access to higher education are aimed at increasing Traveller participation. This will assist in the realisation of the target and enhance our understanding of the barriers that exist in respect of Traveller participation in higher education.

I am grateful to the committee for the opportunity to address it today.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State and acknowledge the active steps she has taken regarding increasing participation by Travellers in higher education. It is important that we acknowledge the significant step that was made last week.

I ask members to stick to questions. I do not want to curb the debate but I want to hear from everybody. I ask them to be cognisant of the time. I would like to ask a couple of questions at the end.

Senator Lynn Ruane: Some of my questions need a small bit of context but I will do it quickly. My questions are aimed at the Minister, Deputy McHugh, in respect of primary and secondary schools. There was a conversation earlier where I brought up the whole issue of DEIS. Sometimes we are afraid to talk about DEIS and the work it does, out of fear of insulting schools, principals and teachers. Sometimes I think we are protecting something at the higher cost of failing a lot of children. I fully believe the DEIS system is not adequate. It has not narrowed the gap between groups but has widened it. It has definitely widened the gap between settled and Traveller students within the school system. There is research available, which I am happy to send on to the Department. There was one important recommendation in the report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills on the need to set up

a cross-departmental task force on education inequality. That would take in most of the stuff the Traveller organisations have been talking about for weeks, namely, the cross-departmental impact of many different Departments on a Traveller child progressing through the education system from second to third level. Does the Minister think it is time the Department carried out an independent review of the DEIS system, perhaps as a longitudinal study? Were he to talk to schools and teachers privately in some of the most deprived communities, they would tell him something very different from what they say when speaking publicly. In many schools it is becoming like crisis management, not education. I really think it is time we acknowledge that DEIS is failing and that it is definitely failing Traveller children in terms of progression through the education system.

Deputy Joe McHugh: On the question about an independent review of the DEIS system, we are carrying out an analysis at the minute and are looking at the historical background to DEIS. When DEIS came in, there was a fear around schools being stigmatised but that fear eroded very quickly as schools saw there was going to be extra resources and extra help. The underlying determination of DEIS status was primarily geographical. We have looked at this and are continuing to look at the evaluation of DEIS. In present-day society, it is not fit for purpose. There are other schools outside the DEIS categorisation that should be in DEIS. We are doing the background analysis and are looking at a more targeted system. There may be affluent geographical areas in which there are still challenges. There could be geographical areas that have DEIS and have really benefited from it and that progression has continued. My utterances on this, both privately and publicly, are to state that we should hold on to what we have in terms of the ring-fenced funding of €120 million, of which about €80 million comes from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for school meals programmes. We will hold on to what we have and ultimately we will be looking at political decisions on funding to add to that €120 million. That is the space I am in politically but it has to be targeted. Senator Ruane was talking about inclusion and bridging the gap between members of the Traveller community and mainstreaming in the classroom. We want to get to a place where we have meaningful inclusion. We have gone from segregation and exclusion. We are in that space of inclusion but we have to get meaningful inclusion, which means participation. We have weaknesses in achieving that inclusion for Travellers in the school system, as in society in general. We will continue to work collaboratively with other Departments. We are working with the Departments of Justice and Equality and Children and Youth Affairs in respect of implementing guidelines on reduced timetables.

Senator Lynn Ruane: On the Department carrying out an assessment itself, an independent assessment is needed. Some schools are a year behind on the curriculum. Some schools are heading into the leaving certificate, including some of the DEIS schools that need more resources and support. The students are reaching their leaving certificate, only addressing subjects three or four weeks before their mock exams. Some other schools start them in fifth year. That cannot continue. As long as assessments are carried out in-house, we will not get to the crux of some of the issues in the schools that are affecting minority groups and Travellers. An assessment independent of the Department is needed to get to the truth of what is happening as a result of lack of resources.

Chairman: The Senator is asking about the need to look at DEIS and for that to be independent. That includes Travellers but it is not exclusively about Travellers. Our committee is looking at Travellers who are within that group.

We have had four weeks of hearings on education and we have heard some distressing and

disturbing testimonies from people who have shared their experiences of the educational system, but also in regard to mental health and health issues as well. Oein de Bhairdúin said that a misconception and a myth that is often repeated is that Travellers do not value education. It is very clear that Travellers do. Representatives of Pavee Point said that Travellers do not so much as drop out, but are pushed out. That was a very clear statement on their part.

The Joint Committee on Education and Skills has done sterling work on researching the reduced timetables, a practice that was hidden in plain sight.

Only 80% of Traveller children transfer from primary school to secondary school. That is an estimate; we do not have firm figures. One in four leaves before the age of 13. Travellers are 50 times more likely to leave school without a leaving certificate than the general population. Only 167 Travellers have accessed third level education and wheels are now turning in respect of that. NALA produced a new statistic today that half of Travellers have poor functional literacy, putting them at grave educational disadvantage.

All of the steps, including the pilots and the NITRIS, indicate that something is happening. If it was twice as likely for a Traveller to leave school without a leaving certificate than a settled person, it would be an issue, but it is 50 times. I asked this question of the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Daly. Does the Minister accept there is a crisis in education affecting Travellers and that the actions need to be viewed in that light?

I believe the Minister promised in the Seanad that he would take forward the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill. When will that be brought before the Dáil? All the NGOs have called for a national education strategy. We have an element of it with the higher education strategy. Senator Coffey identified gaps in further education and we heard about gaps in community education. We hear of great initiatives such as Tobar in Marino. It needs to be put on a firm financial footing so that it can do its important work in encouraging teachers from the Traveller community to be nurtured and brought forward. I understand the Yellow Flag programme is not funded by the Department of Education and Skills but by the Department of Justice and Equality, which I do not understand. That also needs to be put on a firm financial footing. It is about the scale of the job that needs to be done. The pilots are welcome and what was announced last week for higher education is welcome. However, are they anything like enough to address the disparities?

We are having the same conversations here as we are having in Geneva. Reports will be coming back from Geneva and the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill will be a simple box to tick. I would like responses from both Ministers.

Deputy Joe McHugh: The Chairman spoke about Pavee Point referring to drop out or push out. Let us all accept that we have a challenge here. My Department and I accept we have an enormous challenge here. There is no better example to point to than prior to the introduction of DEIS. That challenge was taken on with DEIS, which tries to use a more inclusive model leading to greater progression. One of the outstanding features of this morning's Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, results was the focus on a more equitable education system. OECD comparisons show that there is more of a lift for young people, be it in primary or secondary school, getting a better chance of moving on to third level or to apprenticeships or moving on through the system. We have taken on that challenge and we have much more to do there.

The important emphasis we place on Travellers is shown in recognising Traveller ethnicity

and the Chairman's legislation going through the Seanad. I said in the Seanad that I would be more than happy to bring it before the Dáil. We are now waiting on the report back from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA.

Chairman: When will that come through?

Deputy Joe McHugh: I expect it very shortly. I hope it will be within the next couple of months. I put pressure on officials to try and have it by the end of the year.

Chairman: It was promised in March.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I will keep the committee posted on where we are. I have asked them to prioritise it. They have had enough time to do the work. Once that is ready, I will be in a position to give a date. I want that information before bringing the Bill to the Dáil.

Chairman: We might have a bit of a change; we might have a general election. We would like the legislation through this side of the election.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I do not anticipate a general election for a while. God knows what might happen tonight.

I was present in the Seanad and participated in the debate on that legislation. I was also part of the decision on the place of history in our junior cycle curriculum. Part of the positive feedback I have received from history teachers relates to local history now that junior cycle has that flexibility. There is an abundance of local history and a wealth of information on Traveller culture. We have a great opportunity and I would like progress in that regard.

Functional literacy requires considerable work. I worked on a youth project a long time ago. One of the actions we strongly supported was providing homework clubs for young people in disadvantaged areas. A number of young Travellers participated in a homework club. At the time it was primarily Traveller girls and we had that difficulty of getting Traveller boys into that club. We found other ways for them to participate in formal education, one of which was not as a segregated group but with other young lads from the estate.

It goes back to the Chairman's question on how to have meaningful inclusion and the capacity. We need to upskill and train teachers to ensure that they have the capacity to deal with the literacy and numeracy challenges for all groups and not just Travellers. That is at the heart of our system. At the heart of my education plan when I came into this Department was the word "cumasú", meaning empowerment. My plan aims to empower each individual. Everyone gains from the wealth of a fully inclusive system, not just Travellers.

Chairman: Will Mr. Melia look at that funding?

Mr. Brian Melia: I can do that. Absolutely.

Chairman: Will the Department look quite seriously at our proposals and recommendations? We feel that the Department is under-reacting to the scale of the challenge. While there is a lot happening, we ask whether it is enough. That is the abiding concern running through all the threads, including mental health, health and education. Stuff is happening, which is good, but is it enough to address the scale of the crisis? The Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, accepted that there is a crisis. The Minister said there is an enormous challenge in education. That is the point I wish to make. I would like to hear from the Minister's colleague in that respect as well.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I will pick up on the Chair's point. We hope to learn a lot from these pilots. I know I came in at the tail-end-----

Chairman: That is two years away.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Yes, but if we look at the changes in the education system over the past five to ten years, one of the major points we have heard in feedback from teachers relates to the intensity and pace of change. Members of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills will have heard this. To reassure the committee, we get the message that there are challenges in this sector. We hear about them from principals and teachers and we will meet them head on. Obviously, if there is other information which can add value to that conversation, we are open to hearing it.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: I thank the Chairman for all of the work she does. It is acknowledged throughout the Traveller community. Last week, I launched the action plan for increasing Traveller participation in higher education. I mentioned figures earlier but the Chair is right that there is not meaningful inclusion and in asking whether Travellers drop out or get pushed out. It was very interesting that there were six students at the launch who were in higher education. I launched the action plan at that event and I realised that it connected with what these young students were saying. To give the committee an idea of that, the students said they did not even have the confidence to enter third level. They felt excluded and that they were not welcome. They were uncomfortable. They were bullied and experienced the hate speech which the Chair has talked about so much.

They also talked about what could help them. Three or four distinct pieces of information came through. These are included in the action plan. One relates to the transition from secondary school to third level. Some do not come through secondary school but via another path. They talked about the great importance of the access officer in the higher education institutions. They talked about one good adult helping them to get that confidence. That came up on numerous occasions. They talked about having teachers from the Traveller community in the system. This comes under our path 1 funding, which totals €2.7 million over three years. I believe the Chair was talking about the Tobar project earlier.

Chairman: Is it on a firm footing? That is the question.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: The money I provided covers three years. I believe it is on a firm footing. We aware of the importance of that programme. One of my most senior colleagues, who is an assistant secretary, was at the meeting and he heard exactly what the students were saying. We read documents and meet different adults but it was good to hear what the students themselves had to say.

Other information that was discussed was the schools and universities of sanctuary. I have visited schools of sanctuary in Galway. There are six institutions in the higher education universities and institutes of sanctuary. Again, it is to give students confidence and to welcome them. It is not just academia. There is more to education and more going on. We are trying to understand what prevents students from the Traveller community from going forward.

Chairman: I thank everyone very much. We have had a very long session but we have had long meetings on other important topics. We have held three meetings on mental health, two on health, four on education and we will have four meetings on employment. We are having these meetings because all of these elements are interconnected. Accommodation will be the

final module that we will consider. We will tell how it is but we will make very direct recommendations while acknowledging that some positive things are happening. It is the scale of the challenge and of all of those areas that is arresting. All of us, as committee members, have been shocked anew by the level of disparity between the settled community and Travellers access to education and health, the impact of mental ill health, and employment. It is shocking that there is an 80% unemployment rate among Travellers at a time we, as an economy, enjoy full employment. All of these issues must be addressed and taken seriously.

I thank the Minister of State for attending. I also thank the representatives of the Department, AONTAS, the ETBs, the HEA and NALA for their attendance.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.05 p.m. until 11 a.m. on Tuesday, 10 December 2019.