

Start Strong welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Education and Skills in relation to the development of a new National Skills Strategy to 2025. Start Strong is a coalition of organisations and individuals seeking to advance high quality early care and education for young children in Ireland. Our submission focuses on three broad issues:

- The potential contribution of early years services to the National Skills Strategy, as the first stage of the education system.
- The skill levels of early years educators.
- The barrier to labour market participation created by the high cost of childcare.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Our conclusions and recommendations are organised around the first two of the three themes in the Invitation for Submissions:

### *1. Developing relevant skills*

- (a) Research shows early years services can make a long-term contribution to skills, but only when high quality. The quality of early years services in Ireland is very variable.
  - **Significantly increase investment in the quality of early years services.**
- (b) The quality of early years services is closely related to the skill levels of early years educators. Skill and qualification levels among early years educators are low and will need to rise significantly in the coming years.
  - **Set out targets and timeframes for moving to a graduate-led early years workforce.**
- (c) Additional State supports will be needed to support early years educators to engage in further education and training, and to incentivise upskilling.
  - **Provide funding for paid non-contact time for CPD and for participation in part-time degree programmes.**

### *2. Activating skills*

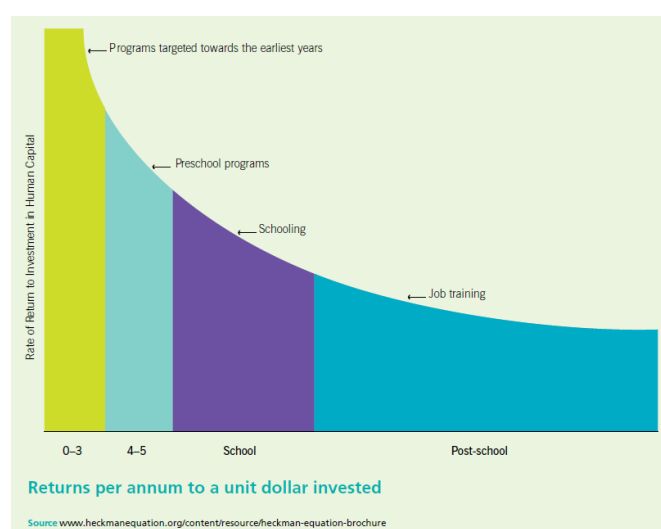
- (a) The high cost of childcare in Ireland is a major barrier to labour market participation. To reduce child poverty, there is a strong case for reducing the cost of childcare for lower-income families. However, quality is critical if children are to benefit, and there are risks for children of long hours in low quality care, especially for under-2s.
  - **To achieve the 'double dividend' of affordability *and* quality, subsidise places directly and link funding to quality.**
- (b) While labour market schemes such as Community Employment (CE) are important in activating skills, participants must be recognised as learners, not as qualified staff.
  - **Do not include participants in labour market schemes such as CE within adult-child ratios in childcare settings.**
- (c) Currently, many qualified early years educators are leaving the early years sector because of low wages and poor job security.
  - **Introduce a salary scale for early years educators.**

## 1. Developing relevant skills

### (a) Contribution of early years services

The Invitation for Submissions correctly notes (pp.24-25) that early childhood education is the first stage in lifelong learning and contributes directly to the National Skills Strategy. Research shows that children's participation in early care and education services can bring significant improvements in outcomes (cognitive, language and social) that last through into adulthood, improving skill levels.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, there is evidence that the economic return to investment in children's early years is higher than the return to investment in later childhood (see chart), because the development of a child's skills builds on skills developed at a younger age.<sup>2</sup> In children's very earliest years, children develop essential skills or dispositions, such as self-regulation, curiosity and perseverance – skills that are both important in themselves and that help children make the most of their later education.



However, research evidence also shows that the benefits of early years services only arise when they are high quality. According to the OECD, 'Expanding access to services without attention to quality will not deliver good outcomes for children or the long-term productivity benefits for society. Furthermore, research has shown that if quality is low, it can have long-lasting detrimental effects on child development, instead of bringing positive effects'.<sup>3</sup>

The quality of early years services in Ireland is very variable,<sup>4</sup> which reflects the lack of public investment. According to the OECD Family Database (2015), Ireland invests only 0.5% of GDP annually in early care and education, compared to the OECD average of 0.8% of GDP. What is more, school infant classes are included in this calculation, with the majority of children in Ireland starting school at age 4. The level of public investment in *pre-school* ECEC services is less than 0.2% GDP,<sup>5</sup> far below the 1% GDP that is regularly cited as a benchmark for high-quality early years provision.

### Recommendation:

- **Significantly increase investment in the quality of early years services.**

<sup>1</sup> Melhuish, E. et al. (2015) *A Review of Research on the Effects of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) on Child Development*, [http://ecec-care.org/fileadmin/careproject/Publications/reports/CARE\\_WP4\\_D4\\_1\\_review\\_of\\_effects\\_of\\_ecec.pdf](http://ecec-care.org/fileadmin/careproject/Publications/reports/CARE_WP4_D4_1_review_of_effects_of_ecec.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> J. Heckman (2006) *The Economics of Investing in Children*, Dublin: UCD Geary Institute, Policy Briefing No.1.

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox*, Paris: OECD, p.9.

<sup>4</sup> Start Strong (2014) *'Childcare' – Business or Profession?* pp.81-83.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2013), *op. cit.*, p.7.



### *(b) Skill levels among early years educators*

The key determinant of quality in early years services is the skill level of early years educators. In Ireland, qualification levels in early years services are low by international standards, which reflects the lack of public investment and particularly the low wages (little more than the minimum wage) and poor working conditions in the sector.

The most recent (end 2014) data on qualification levels of staff in early years services data indicates that:<sup>6</sup>

- 13% of staff remain unqualified, in spite of a Government commitment in 2013 to introduce a minimum qualification requirement at Level 5 NFQ by September 2015. In June this year, the Government postponed by a further year the minimum qualification requirement.
- The proportion of staff who have achieved a qualification at Level 7 or above is still only 15% (up marginally from 12% in 2012), well below the 60% international benchmark.

A number of research reviews point to the benefits of *graduate-level* qualifications in early years services. The 'CoRe' study on *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care* (ECEC), carried out for the European Commission, concludes that:

'Researchers agree that the level of initial professional preparation for ECEC core practitioners should be set at BA level (ISCED 5)... Our study supports this recommendation. Quality of ECEC would need at least one qualified (ISCED 5) staff member in each "classroom" or with each group of children'.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Recommendation:**

- **Set out targets and timeframes for moving to a graduate-led early years workforce.**

### *(c) State supports for upskilling early years educators*

Major barriers to the upskilling of the early years workforce include:

- State funding for further training has focused on supporting educators to meet minimum qualification requirements, rather than progress to higher qualifications. The Learner Fund, established in 2014, has only supported minimum qualifications: Level 5 and (for Leaders in the Pre-School Year) Level 6 qualifications. There is no financial support available for existing staff who wish to undertake part-time Level 7 or 8 qualifications.
- There is no State funding for non-contact time with children, so staff who do take part in CPD do so on a voluntary basis for no pay, and early years service providers receive no funding to enable them to release staff for training. Given regulatory requirements to meet adult-child ratios, providers have little capacity to support their staff to take time out from working with children for the purpose of CPD.
- Wages in the sector are low (typically at minimum wage level or just above), and there is no salary scale. As a result, there is typically no financial incentive for educators to upskill themselves.

<sup>6</sup> Pobal (2015) *Early Years Sector Survey 2014*, Dublin: Pobal, pp.55-63.

<sup>7</sup> University of East London and University of Gent (2011) *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care: Study for the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture*, p.50.



If quality levels are to rise in early years services, additional State supports will therefore be needed to support early years educators to engage in further education and training, and to incentivise upskilling. In particular, there will be a need to introduce paid non-contact time for CPD, and to extend the Learner Fund to support current educators to progress to Level 7 and 8 qualifications. It will also be necessary to introduce a salary scale, so that those with higher qualifications receive financial recognition (see further below).

In addition, it will be necessary to ensure that qualifications in early care and education are all of a high standard. For example, there is currently no general requirement that those delivering most training programmes should themselves be qualified and experienced in early care and education.

#### **Recommendation:**

- **Provide funding for paid non-contact time for CPD and for participation in part-time degree programmes.**

## **2. Activating skills**

### *(a) Affordable, quality childcare*

According to the European Commission's 2015 *Country Report on Ireland*, 'Limited access to affordable and quality childcare is a barrier to increased female labour market participation'.<sup>8</sup> Outside the Free Pre-School Year, childcare in Ireland remains among the most costly to parents in all EU and OECD countries. OECD figures indicate that childcare fees for a family in Ireland with two children aged 2-3 amount to between 24% and 35% of the net income of a typical dual-earner family and 40% of the net income of a lone-parent family with average income. In contrast, the average cost across the EU is between a quarter and a half of the Irish average, at 10% – 13% of net income – for both dual-earner and lone parent families.<sup>9</sup>

To reduce child poverty, there is a strong case for reducing the childcare-cost barrier to labour market participation for lower-income families. However, given the critical importance of quality, if children are to benefit, childcare-affordability measures must be designed in such a way as to support quality improvements. Reducing the cost of *low-quality* childcare risks harming children. There are particular risks for children associated with long hours in low quality care, especially for very young children (under 2 years old).<sup>10</sup>

According to the OECD, the most effective way to achieve the double dividend of childcare that is both affordable and high quality is through 'supply-side' subsidies to early years services, rather than through 'consumer subsidies' such as tax credits. The reason is that supply-side subsidies give governments more 'steering capacity' over what happens in services than is offered by tax credits. To quote the OECD:

'...The OECD reviews suggest that direct public funding of services brings, in the majority of countries reviewed, more effective control, advantages of scale, better national quality, more effective training for educators and a higher degree of equity in access and participation than consumer subsidy models.'<sup>11</sup>

#### **Recommendations:**

- **To achieve the 'double dividend' of affordability *and* quality, subsidise places directly and link funding to quality.**

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2015) *Country Report Ireland 2015*, SWD (2015) 27 final.

<sup>9</sup> OECD (2014) *Benefits and Wages: Statistics*, Paris: OECD, <http://www.oecd.org/els/benefitsandwagesstatistics.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Melhuish, E. *et al.* (2015) *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris: OECD, p.114.



### *(b) Labour market activation and childcare provision*

Many community-based early years services are dependent on participants in labour market schemes, in particular Community Employment. In 2014, 21% of those working in community services were on labour-market programmes (an increase on the previous year), accounting for 8% of all workers in early years services.<sup>12</sup> However, many of the CE workers and participants on other labour market schemes have not achieved the Level 5 minimum qualification in early care and education which is due to come into force in September 2016.

While schemes such as Community Employment can combine labour market activation with training and upskilling, it is important that participants in those schemes are recognised as learners, not as qualified staff. Given the critical importance of quality in early care and education, if children are to benefit, participants in labour market schemes such as CE should not count towards adult-child ratios for qualified staff, and should not be exempt from the minimum qualification requirement.

#### **Recommendation:**

- **Do not include participants in labour market schemes such as CE within adult-child ratios in childcare settings.**

### *(c) Recruiting and retaining qualified staff*

While the proportion of early years educators with Level 7 or 8 qualifications has increased slightly in recent years, the increase in the number of graduates in the sector does not match the rapid rise in the number of students taking degree-level courses. Many early years graduates appear to be seeking work elsewhere or moving into primary school teaching.<sup>13</sup>

Particular obstacles to the recruitment and retention of qualified early years educators are:

- Low wages for those working in the sector, with many qualified staff earning little more than the minimum wage.<sup>14</sup>
- There is no salary scale in the sector. Salaries are often no higher for highly qualified staff than for those with minimum qualifications, and there are only limited opportunities for career progression. Indeed, a Start Strong study in 2014<sup>15</sup> found that *managers* in larger early years centres typically earn around €28,000 to €38,000, little more than the *starting salary* for a primary school teacher.
- Job security is poor. In particular, because State funding for delivery of the Free Pre-School Year is limited to contact hours for 38 weeks of the year, many staff working with children in the pre-school year are laid off during the summer months. Approximately 14% of the early years workforce sign on the Live Register during the summer.<sup>16</sup>

In order to recruit and retain qualified staff, to raise quality standards in the sector, it will be necessary to introduce a salary scale, raising the minimum salary level and also increasing the financial returns to higher qualification levels.

#### **Recommendation:**

- **Introduce a salary scale for early years educators.**

<sup>12</sup> Pobal (2015), *op. cit.*, pp.52-53.

<sup>13</sup> Moloney, M. (2015) *Untangling the Knots – [K]not Easy: Professional Identity in the ECCE Sector*, [www.ecalignment.ie](http://www.ecalignment.ie)

<sup>14</sup> Start Strong (2014) 'Childcare' – *Business or Profession?* pp.76-78.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015) *Report of Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland*, p.23.



## Start Strong supporters

Start Strong is a coalition of organisations and individuals committed to advancing high quality care and education for all young children in Ireland. Start Strong has a growing number of Supporters. We value their support as we work to advance high quality care and education as a right for all young children in Ireland.

**Organisations.** We currently have 66 organisational supporters:

ABC Childcare	Early Childhood Ireland	Education Centre
An Gairdín Scoil	Equality and Diversity	Preparing for Life
Montessori	Early Childhood	Prevention and Early
Association of Childhood	National Network	Intervention Network
Professionals	(EDENN)	Puddleducks Pre-school
Barnardos	Fingal County Childcare	Holy Child Pre-School
Bonnybrook Early	Committee	(Rutland Street Project)
Education Centre	Finglas Childcare Limited	Sligo County Childcare
Brigit's Hearth Children's	The Genesis Programme,	Committee
Centre	Co. Louth	Society of Saint Vincent
Bright Horizons Family	Grange Park Crèche and	de Paul
Solutions	Montessori	South Dublin County
Canal Communities	Grovelands Childcare	Childcare Committee
Partnership	Institute of Community	Southside Partnership
Childcare Network Loch	Health Nursing	SpunOut.ie
Garman	Irish Penal Reform Trust	Step-by-Step Montessori
Childminding Ireland	JAGGO Pre-school	Pre-school
Children in Northern	Kildare County Childcare	Strategic Innovation in
Ireland	Committee	Education, Limerick
Children's Rights Alliance	Lifestart	Univ.
Cork City Childcare	Little Stars Pre-school,	Tallaght West Childhood
Committee	Montessori &	Development Initiative
Cork County Childcare	Afterschool, Donegal	Úlla Beag Pre &
Committee	Louth County Childcare	Afterschool Care
Cork Early Years Network	Committee	UNESCO Child & Family
Centre for Research in	Meath County Childcare	Research Centre, NUI
Early Childhood (CREC)	Committee	Galway
Deansrath Family Centre	Montessori Alliance	Waterford Area
Disability Equality	National Childhood	Partnership
Specialist Support	Network (formerly	Waterford Childcare
Agency (DESSA)	BCCN)	Committee
Donegal County	National Women's	Western Area Childcare
Childcare Committee	Council of Ireland	Partnership
Dublin City Childcare	North Tipperary Childcare	Westmeath County
Committee	Committee	Childcare Committee
Dublin West Childcare	OMEP Ireland	Wicklow County
and Learning Services	One Family	Childcare Committee
Early Learning Initiative,	The PlayDen Montessori	youngballymun
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We also have a growing number of individual supporters (available on our website). If you would like to become a supporter of Start Strong, please contact us on [info@startstrong.ie](mailto:info@startstrong.ie) or through our website [www.startstrong.ie](http://www.startstrong.ie)

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