



Pavee Point Opening Statement to the Special Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community: Education

November, 2019

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre ('Pavee Point') have been working to challenge racism and promote Traveller and Roma inclusion in Ireland since 1985. The organisation works from a community development perspective and promotes the realisation of human rights and equality for Travellers and Roma in Ireland. The organisation is comprised of Travellers, Roma and members of the majority population, who work together in partnership to address the needs of Travellers and Roma as minority ethnic groups experiencing exclusion, marginalisation and racism. Working for social justice, solidarity and human rights, the central aim of Pavee Point is to contribute to improvement in the quality of life and living circumstances of Irish Travellers and Roma, this includes equality of access, participation and outcomes in education.

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***"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world"-
Nelson Mandela***

We thank the Chairperson and members of the Committee. We are delighted to have the opportunity to be here and welcome the Committee's focus on Traveller education. We have provided a comprehensive and detailed submission which will serve as a reference document should it need it in the future. We will give a quick overview of the issues involved and leave time for a discussion which will be the best use of the Committee's time.

As noted in our submission, from the very beginning, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre has given central importance to pursuing full and equal participation for Travellers throughout the education system. This was and is based on our understanding of the utmost importance of education for human dignity and rights. I am confident many of you would agree education is a fundamental right, one that Travellers have not had the opportunity to enjoy and benefit from as they should have. As UNICEF recently stated, Traveller children are still falling between the cracks, with the vast majority of Traveller children ceasing education before Junior Certificate level.

This is further evident from the stark statistics in relation to inequality of access, participation and outcomes for Travellers in education. That is that;

- Only 13% of Travellers complete secondary education in comparison with 92% of the majority population
- The majority of Traveller children (67.3%) live in families where the mother has either no formal education or primary education only
- Nearly two thirds of Travellers experience discrimination at school
- 13% of female Travellers are educated to upper secondary level or above, compared with 69% of the majority population
- 57% of male Travellers are educated to primary level at most, compared with 13.6% of the majority population
- 28% of Travellers leave school before the age of 13, compared to 1% of majority population
- Half (50%) of Travellers live outside of DEIS educational areas

The Joint Committee on Education and Skills heard earlier this year about the cuts to Traveller education under the guise of austerity (-86.6%) which have yet to be restored. These cuts came at a time when significant progress was being made in relation to enrolment, retention, attendance and attainment levels. According to the 2016 Census there are around 5,000 Travellers aged 15 – 19 years old in Ireland. Traveller enrolments in second-level schools peaked at 2,699 students in 2010 - over twice the 2000/01 enrolment demonstrating the impact of positive targeted measures for Travellers.

After austerity cuts, which dismantled educational support services for Travellers, positive outcomes for Travellers were significantly impacted. Traveller enrolments dropped by 10% in DEIS schools, and by 9% in non-DEIS schools. As others before me have attested, the damage that was inflicted by these austerity cuts will take our

community and young people a long time to recover from, to reach the levels that were achieved before the cuts and to improve on them.

The 2017 ESRI report, *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” with their settled peers. This was echoed by European Commission during its review of Ireland in 2016 who 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 (e.g. regarding their health and housing situation) policies should be adjusted and specific measures should also be developed”.

Traveller organisations are willing, ready and able to undertake the work that needs to be address Traveller educational inequalities. However, we require support and leadership from the Department of Education and Skills to make this happen and to commit to a clear and ringfenced Traveller education budget.

We welcome that some State agencies have taken positive action measures, for example, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency recently implemented a two year education pilot to support the retention of Traveller (and Roma) children in the education system. Also positive developments are being seen in relation to including Travellers history and culture in the curriculum. This is really important for ensuring that Travellers feel part of the school community and that our culture and history is valued on an equal status to settled people.

However, stronger leadership and investment by the Department of Education and Skills is required to support long-term sustainable initiatives in order to ensure positive outcomes for Travellers. The Department of Skills and Education has failed to respond to repeated calls from Traveller organisations for the development of a new strategic Traveller and Roma Education Strategy with the inclusion of a mechanism within the Department to provide oversight of the implementation of key actions and maintain accountability to.

Pavee Point understand that many people within the education system, as well as the Traveller Community, feel extremely let down and disempowered by the lack of effective response and leadership from the Department of Education to the educational inequalities experienced by young Travellers through implementation of positive policy developments. Our children and young people are being left behind. These inequalities have additional serious repercussions for the future employment opportunities for the young members of our community and compounds inability to combat economic marginalisation.

Pavee Point urges the Department to take on board the statements from Travellers and Traveller organisations today and to take up your share of responsibility in bringing about positive social change for Travellers.

It is in this context that we make the following recommendations:

Traveller Education: Recommendations

- Department of Education and Skills to develop an Action Plan for Traveller Education in partnership with national Traveller organisations; a National Traveller Education Advisory group to be established in the Department of Education and Skills to prioritise, give oversight, and secure accountability for the education needs of Travellers.
- The Department of Education and Skills should provide funding to independent Traveller organisations to address Traveller education needs and inequalities.
- The Department of Education and Skills School Inspectorate should undertake an audit of the application of 'limited/reduced timetables' on Traveller children and publish its report. The Inspectorate should also identify a mechanism to capture the use of 'limited/reduced timetables' when carrying out school inspections.
- Department of Education and Skills must consult with national Travellers organisations in the development of Guidelines on Reduced Timetables.
- Publication of disaggregated data on the basis of ethnicity in secondary schools (PPOD) to monitor participation and outcomes of Traveller students.
- Ensure that the inclusion of Traveller culture and history in school curriculum takes place in active consultation with Traveller organisations and acts as a precedent for further inclusion of all the cultures which are part of Ireland.
- Undertake measures to ensure ongoing mandatory training of education personnel on anti-Traveller discrimination and racism, and ensure school inspections and other monitoring and accountability systems include assessment of schools' interculturalism and anti-racism policies, curricula, and practice.
- The Equity of Access Plan for Higher Education, Path one funding for diversification of the teacher profile, should have specific targets for Travellers.