

INVESTING IN EDUCATION

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Education matters because it is intrinsically valuable, allowing children and young people to develop intellectually, socially and morally. It also matters because, in Ireland, as in many other countries, education is a powerful predictor of adult life chances. Young people who leave school early do not reach their full potential and experience restricted opportunities across many dimensions of their lives. A new study by Emer Smyth and Selina McCoy,[†] addresses the costs of early school leaving to the individual and to the broader society. The study draws on a range of information to assess outcomes among early school leavers and to analyse policy interventions designed to prevent school drop-out.

The study shows that having a Leaving Certificate qualification now operates as the ‘minimum’ needed to secure access to post-school education/training and high quality employment, among other outcomes. Those who left school before the Leaving Certificate were three to four times more likely to be unemployed than those with higher qualifications, even before the current recession. Early school leavers are more likely to become lone parents, earn less if they have a job, have poorer health and are more likely to be in prison. One in six Irish young people still leave school without reaching Leaving Certificate level. These early leavers mainly come from working-class backgrounds, so that patterns of early leaving reinforce existing social and economic inequality. Early school leaving is found to have substantial costs for the young people themselves and for society as a whole. Higher rates of early school leaving mean higher expenditure on welfare, health and prisons and lower tax revenue.

International research has indicated that early childhood education is crucial in promoting the educational and social development of disadvantaged children. In addition, measures to boost academic engagement and achievement (such as more hands-on learning, a positive school climate and mixed ability grouping) also emerge as key factors in retaining young people within full-time education. In addressing educational inequality, a number of countries have adopted compensatory approaches targeting funding on disadvantaged areas and/or schools. This targeted approach has also formed the core of Irish policy addressing educational disadvantage, with additional

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funding directed at designated disadvantaged schools through the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme.

ESRI research indicates that targeting resources on disadvantaged schools is not enough to counter educational inequality. Survey evidence indicates that, at least in the second-level sector, over half of disadvantaged young people are attending non-designated disadvantaged (DEIS) schools, and thus do not benefit from such targeted support. For schools in disadvantaged areas, interviews with school principals indicate that they are generally positive about several aspects of this targeted funding, including the focus on literacy and numeracy and funding for educational resources. However, both school principals and policy stakeholders raised issues regarding the assessment criteria used for access, the gap on school entry between disadvantaged children and their better-off peers, and more broadly, the capacity of the school to 'close the gap' between their children and their counterparts in non-DEIS schools.

The issue of educational disadvantage is even more pertinent in the current climate. The current recession is likely to have a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged children and their families in terms of unemployment and associated problems, such as drug use and crime. Recent expenditure cuts have attracted criticism in terms of their impact on the educational system as a whole and on disadvantaged groups in particular. A number of measures, such as the abolition of the book grant scheme for non-DEIS schools, the reduced capitation grant for Travellers, and the reduced curricular programme grants, are likely to have a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged students, especially those attending non-designated disadvantaged (DEIS) schools.

Since the publication of the *Investing in Education* report in June, the McCarthy report has raised the possibility of further reductions in educational expenditure. Again many of the measures indicated, including an increase in student-teacher ratios, a reduction in capitation fees and decreases in specialist personnel for immigrant students and those with special educational needs, are likely to have disproportionate impacts on more disadvantaged groups of children and their families. A major shortcoming of the McCarthy report is its failure to assess the relative costs and benefits attached to educational expenditure. Our research clearly indicates that investment in education yields significant economic and social benefits for society at large. In the current difficult climate, it is important that the long-term importance of such investment in education is not forgotten.

[†]Smyth, E. and McCoy, S., 2009. "[*Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage*](#)", Economic and Social Research Institute and Barnardos.