In this Section:

Introduction

This section focuses on early school leavers. It presents demographics relating to early school leaving in the Republic of Ireland. It explains the varying needs and issues that young people who have left school early may face and it offers practical advice on working with early school leavers. It concludes with a list of resources that will help you in your work with early school leavers.

Terminology

The legal definition of early school leaving in the Republic of Ireland is 'non-participation in school before a young person reaches age 16 or before completing three years post-primary education, or whichever is later'.[i] However, another useful definition is 'leaving the education system without a minimum of five passes in the Leaving Certificate or equivalent qualification'.[ii]

Early school leaver is the acceptable term to use. Avoid using the term dropout because it may be perceived as derogatory. Many early school leavers have not 'dropped out' of education. Instead they may have made a conscious decision to pursue education and training in other forums - such as Youthreach or apprenticeships.

Demographics

The prevalence of early school leaving in the Republic of Ireland is best demonstrated by the Department of Education statistics of the 60,786 young people who began secondary school in 1999. The figures show that 16.3% of the 1999 cohort did not complete second level education. This figure has been adjusted to include students who left state funded schools to attend private schools, and also for those who left school due to emigration or death. Based on the un-adjusted figure of 19.5%, the table below outlines the numbers and percentages of young people who started school each academic year:[iii]

Year	Percentage starting	Number starting
1st year	100%	60,786
2nd year	98.6% (-1.4%)	59,914
3rd year	96.7% (-3.3%)	58,805
Sat Junior Cert exam	94.6% (-5.4%)	57,510
4th year	92% (-8%)	55,913
5th year	84.4% (-15.6%)	51, 287
6th year	80.5% (-19.5%)	48,933

The largest exodus was after transition year (7.6%). However, there are a variety of contributing factors to this figure, such as the movement of students from state funded schools to privately funded institutions for the senior cycle.

Changing patterns of Early School Leaving

The figures for the 1999 cohort show an increase in retention rates in schools of 0.4% from the 1998 cohort and a 3.4% increase in retention rates form the 1991 cohort. While there has been a gradual decrease in the numbers of young people leaving school early, figures from the Central Statistics Office taken from the second quarter of 2008, show that 14% of the Irish population aged between 15 and 64 had an educational attainment level of 'primary or below' thus pointing to a significant prevalence of low educational achievement within the population at large.

Within the Republic of Ireland itself, the school retention rates vary considerably. County Leitrim has the highest Leaving Certificate retention rate of 91.2%, while Dublin City has the lowest retention rates at 72.1%.[iv] The considerable variation in retention rates across Ireland highlights the fact that early school leaving requires localised and community-based interventions as well as interventions on a national level. The complete table of leaving certificate retention levels for each county can be found in the Department of Education and Skills report on the 'Retention Rates of Pupils in Second Level Schools'.

From a European-wide perspective, the Republic of Ireland is currently ranked 19th out of the 27 EU member states for levels of early school leaving. The overall percentage of 18-24 year olds in Ireland classed as early school leavers (educational attainment of lower secondary or below) is 11%, while the European average for the same age group is 15%.[v]

Needs and Issues of Early School Leavers

Economic overview

The 'Celtic Tiger' has had a massive effect on the educational trends of today. With the construction industry booming in the Republic of Ireland, the trend of leaving school early to pursue an apprenticeship became prevalent in Irish society. For many, this decision led to the chance of training, a full time job and job security for a number of years. In 2006, only 5% of early school leavers were unemployed, however in 2008, this rose to 21%.[vi] A negative economic climate leads to a decrease in the employment opportunities available to early school leavers. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the employment market has become increasingly competitive and the Leaving Certificate is the minimum level of education required for many occupations.

A negative economic climate also contributes to the retention initiatives run within school

systems. The services within mainstream schools that provide extra support to a potential early school leaver suffer severe funding cutbacks in times of recession. Psychological services, special needs teachers, English language support teachers and Home School Liaison Officers have had resources considerably reduced in recent times in Ireland. With a decrease in support systems within schools, the young people who should reap their benefits are in danger of marginalisation within the mainstream system and may opt out of that system as a result.

Understanding Early School Leaving

Early school leavers should not be viewed as a homogenous group. In order for a young person to leave mainstream education early, a myriad of needs and issues will have been faced by the young person and failures to meet these needs will exist. These needs and issues are as varied as they are numerous. One of the main perceptions that exist about early school leavers is that they were somehow academically incapable of completing mainstream education and 'toeing the line'. However, in reality the current system cannot cater to the catalogue of diverse needs of young people today and because of this, early school leaving is a prevalent and pressing issue for many communities.

Many young people who have left school early feel that they are viewed as 'wasters' or 'losers' by the community at large. Paradoxically however, for many young people leaving mainstream education is the bravest and the most positive course of action to take. With ever decreasing supports in schools and ever increasing class sizes, many young people fall through the cracks and are isolated in mainstream schools. 53% of young early school leavers will continue their education in facilities such as Youthreach where they can receive necessary supports and continue a more participant-centred form of education[vii] We must appreciate the right of a young person to receive their education in the medium that they feel is most appropriate. Mainstream education may not be the most appropriate form of education for all.

A negative stereotyping toward early school leavers exists and creates a stigma around the issue. It is important when working with an early school leaver to recognise this and respond sensitively to the reasons why they left school early if they decide to share these with you.

Impact of Early School Leaving

The impact of early school leaving can be very disruptive to a young person's development and it can have a detrimental effect on their socio-economic standing in the future. The stage at which a young person decides to leave school is of utmost importance, the earlier a young person leaves, the more problematic this can be in their future. Those who fail to obtain five or more passes in their Junior Certificate will experience greater trouble in finding employment than those with a full Junior Certificate.[viii] In addition to this, many employers or training courses require a minimum of Leaving Certificate completion.

The attainment of the Leaving Certificate provides a formal qualification and although necessary to demonstrate educational achievement it does not convey the social and personal attributes that are gained by completing the secondary school experience. Leaving school early or being habitually absent from school due to truancy can be detrimental to social and personal development as well as affecting academic development and attainment. Leaving school early may prevent the development of specific skills that will allow a person to 'function within certain environments'.[ix] In school we not only receive academic tuition but we are taught important social skills such as, how to work and function within a group environment, and how to behave within pre-existing social and institutional boundaries. The school environment also exposes us to people of many different ethnicities, personalities and to many different points of view. Therefore the risk is that a person who leaves school early leaves deficient of a skill set necessary to participate in their society to their full potential.

There is a real risk of long-term socio-economic disadvantage for an early school leaver. For

many, leaving school early will lead to narrower employment opportunities and an increased likelihood of poverty and unemployment.[x]

Early school leaving can also lead to an increased chance of teenage pregnancy, criminal activity and psychological issues such as depression and anxiety.[xi]

For more information see the sections in this Toolkit on Working with Young Parents, Young People involved with the Juvenile Justice System and Young People with Mental Health Issues.

Why do some young people leave school early?

There are many reasons why some young people do not stay at school. The important thing to remember when working with an early school leaver is that their decision to opt out of mainstream education is a symptom of the wider range of issues that they are facing. These issues may fall into a number of categories such as personal, social, family, economic or school-based problems. 58% of early school leavers attribute their decision to leave school to school based issues, 30% to economic and 4% to family issues.[xii]

A number of common reasons why young people leave school early are outlined below but this list is not exhaustive and is only a guide to what potential problems the young person may be experiencing or have experienced. There is no archetypical early school leaver and stereotyping should be avoided.

Personal:

⇒ **Low self esteem - which may be exacerbated by an ineffectual school policy in dealing with low levels of literacy and numeracy**

⇒ **Substance misuse/abuse[xiii] - which may cause lower levels of motivation and also lead to truancy and behavioural problems**

⇒ **Learning difficulties which are undiagnosed or may not be supported effectively**

⇒ **Lack of motivation - which may be due to a negative perception of the importance of education and its relevance to 'real life'**

Social:

⇒   **Life style – the includes substance abuse or misuse, negative sleeping patterns and anti-social behaviour**

⇒   **Poverty - there are higher levels of early school leaving in areas of lower-socio economic standing.[xiv] Young people may opt out of school due to high participation costs**

⇒   **Young offenders - 40% of young offenders have left school before the age of 14.[xv] The question is whether the prelude to offending behaviour was leaving school early or if leaving school early led to the offending behaviour**

Family:

⇒   **Parental attitudes toward education i.e. clash of home and school cultures**

⇒   **Family conflict or change (e.g. death or separation)**

⇒   **High school participation costs**

⇒   **Family poverty - a young person may feel the need to opt out of education in order to help support their family**

Economic:

⇒   **Celtic Tiger and its legacy – there is more pressure to achieve wealth within an affluent society. [xvi] This can lead to increased pressure on young people who may have left school as a result. Also the draw of apprenticeships during the 'boom years' encouraged young people to leave school early**

School:

> ⇒ **Low levels of literacy and numeracy leading to poor performance and decrease in self esteem or behavioural problems**
>
> ⇒ **Age differences - when the student is older/younger than their classmates[xvii]**
>
> ⇒ **English being a foreign language**
>
> ⇒ **Negative relationships with teachers leading to increased bad behaviour or suspension on a regular basis**
>
> ⇒ **Absence of counselling services in school**
>
> ⇒ **Perceived lack of suitability of curricula - the perception that the curriculum is "boring" [xviii] and is not relevant to their real lives**
>
> ⇒ **Poor achievement in school leading to lack of motivation**

Which Young People are at risk of leaving school early?

Gender bias

Gender differences in figures for early school leavers are stark. 15% of males aged 18-24 were identified as early school leavers in 2008 compared to only 8% of females from the same age group.[xix] As a general rule across the country, there are two male early school leavers to every female early school leaver. Males participate in more apprenticeships and labouring positions than females which may go some way to explain the gender bias.

Travellers

Many young people from the Traveller community leave school early. It is estimated that as many of 75% of young people from the Traveller community leave school with no qualifications.[xx] The Visiting Teacher for Travellers Service is dedicated to facilitating and supporting education for Travellers up to third level. Details of the Visiting Teacher for Travellers in your area can be found by calling the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) on 1890 363666.

For more information please refer to the section on Working with Young Travellers in this Toolkit.

Young mothers

There is a strong correlation between teenage pregnancy and early school leaving; this correlation is especially strong for young mothers. Teenage mothers have only a 49% probability of having their upper secondary qualifications.[xxi] However, in the relationship between early school leaving and teenage pregnancy it is difficult to outline where the cause and effect lie.

For more information please refer to the section on Working with Young Parents in this Toolkit.

Young Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Undocumented Migrants

A number of asylum seekers and refugees will have missed out on schooling in their home countries due to war, conflict and displacement. In Ireland those under 18 will be given places in Irish schools. However, due to a probable disruption in their schooling, possible difficulty with English language and high stress levels, their ability to settle, concentrate and achieve good results can be severely compromised and may lead to difficulties completing their Leaving Certificate. While refugees can avail of all courses similar to any Irish citizen, both asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who reach the age of 18 have difficulty accessing education as they are no longer entitled to free state education after this age. (Some schools make exceptions and accept over 18's.) Post Leaving Cert courses are unavailable to these young people unless they pay international fees to attend a course. This can be a de-motivating factor for these young people that can lead to early school leaving.

Nevertheless, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants and refugees are usually very keen to learn and catch up on their education. Short term courses, computer based courses and single subject courses are often the best means of achieving success and building their confidence.

For more information please refer to the section on Working with Young People from a Minority Ethnic background.

Practical Tips for Working with Early School Leavers

Work with schools

One of the best ways to assist early school leavers is to help prevent young people from leaving school early. Due to the schools duty of care and an increased focus on the holistic care of young people, schools are under increased pressure to address the range of social, psychological and personal issues affecting young people today. This is often done with very limited available resources. For example, many schools do not have a full-time student counsellor, home-school liaison officer or educational support worker who can often help retain potential early school leavers within the formal education system.

Youth services are in an ideal position to provide support to at-risk young people. The youth work sector has a unique responsibility within communities to attempt to reconcile formal and non-formal education. One of the most effective methods is to work in partnership with schools. Many youth services have the staffing, resources and time available to provide case management and support for young people at risk of leaving school early.[xxii]

Some potential programmes that may be offered are:

⇒ **Stress management and relaxation workshops**

⇒ **Family support and liaison services**

⇒ **Anger management programmes**

⇒ **Peer mediation**

⇒ **Case management**

⇒ **Breakfast programmes**

⇒ **Lunch programmes**

⇒ **Practical assistance with sporting programmes**

⇒ **Homework help**

⇒ **Referrals to certified counsellors in order to complement the work of the school counsellor**

⇒ **Referral to appropriate community agencies**

⇒ **Intensive support for students who truant, are suspended, excluded or expelled**

⇒ **Support for particular groups of young people such as young refugees, asylum seekers, migrants or young Travellers**

⇒ **Transfer programmes between primary and secondary school**

Retention initiatives such as the above may be pre-existing within local schools. Alternatively programmes may need to be developed in partnership with the schools. When working with schools on programme development, an understanding of the school's policies, guidelines and referral procedures is essential. The development of a protocol which outlines roles, responsibilities, agreements and communication channels can be a strong foundation for a school and community service partnership. An amicable working relationship with local schools is essential in meeting the challenge that early school leaving presents.

Best practice programmes for early school leavers:

> ⇒ **Listen to the views of young people and provide opportunities for them to have their say about programme design, management and evaluation**
>
> ⇒ **Use a strengths-based approach to programme content - support young people in developing their specific aptitudes and strengths**
>
> ⇒ **Ensure that programme content is delivered with varied media such as drama or games as well as written or verbal**
>
> ⇒ **When possible use smaller groups when working with early school leavers**
>
> ⇒ **Establish positive and respectful relationships between young people and supportive adults**
>
> ⇒ **Build teamwork and cooperation between students**
>
> ⇒ **Set fair rules and expectations which are consistently applied**
>
> ⇒ **Encourage young people to take responsibility for their learning and behaviour**
>
> ⇒ **Focus on skills that are practical and prepare young people for life and work and/or further education**
>
> ⇒ **Provide support in developing and achieving their short and long-term goals where possible**
>
> ⇒ **Adopt an holistic approach and liaise with family and relevant agencies regarding participants where appropriate**
>
> ⇒ **Emphasise achievement and not failure - use recognition nights if a programme has finished[xxiii]**

Truancy issues

Your service should have a clear policy about opening hours and services for students who truant. Work with your local school to provide support for young people who truant, and ensure your programmes address the reasons for truancy behaviour.

Offer a quiet space for homework

Many libraries, community centres and youth services offer homework help or a quiet space for homework. The most effective of these services use qualified staff and volunteers who have experience in teaching and are familiar with the school curriculum.

'Working with Early School Leavers' was developed by Maria Lally
(Foróige – Blanchardstown Youth Service)

If there is no homework help in your local area, develop a community action group in order to work with other community agencies to develop a safe and quiet place for after school study.

Have a quiet space, computers and internet facilities available at your service for students completing assignments and homework. Many successful homework groups provide a snack at the start, a period for homework and a sport or art & crafts hour to add incentive for attendance.

Don't rely on literacy skills to advertise or run your Programmes

Consider a range of verbal strategies for advertising that includes:

⇒ **Outreach work: speak to young people face to face in areas where they hang out**
⇒ **Outreach work in schools: speak at school assemblies or have a stand in the hall/ unch area at break times**
⇒ **Provide a phone information service and have regular updates on your answering machine about upcoming events**
⇒ **Participate in local community radio interviews**

Young people with a low level of literacy may be nervous about attending your service because they may be conscious of exposing their lack of literacy skills. Therefore, when registration forms or other forms need to be filled out by a young person it would be good practice to provide a private place for them to do this and make it known to all participants that you can provide assistance in filling these forms out if necessary.

Make sure any information given in a written format to young people is also given verbally. Make use of the first few minutes of a group to give updates on any written information/ new posters/groups available.

Check that young people can access your service without being able to read. For example check that it is clear where your service is located if you are in a multi-purpose centre, or what time your service is open if you are away from the premises.

Try to avoid situations where young people feel stigmatised for not being able to read well, this includes reading/writing in group work, filling in surveys, taking notes at meetings.

Be very aware of the language used in promotion of groups or clubs as well as the language used to deliver instructions or to run programmes. Formal language may alienate those who do not have English as a first language or those who have low vocabulary levels due to literacy problems.

Incorporate literacy and numeracy skills into your programme

A good way of supporting students who experience learning difficulties is to incorporate literacy and numeracy skills into the fun programmes you run.

For example if you have a group of young people who want to run a band night you can work with them on:

> ⇒ **Numeracy skills such as budgeting for the event, working out how many drinks to buy, ticketing, counting income, working out how many songs can fit into a play list for each band etc.**
> ⇒ **Literacy skills such as writing a media release, writing information for flyers, writing an evaluation etc.**

Literacy and numeracy skills can be incorporated into just about any programme.

Consult constantly with Young People

The promotion of independence and personal autonomy in groups is always a positive addition to programme design; however it also gives you an opportunity to run groups in direct consultation with the young people. Young early school leavers will have left the mainstream educational system due to a number of reasons; by allowing them input into the group many of these issues may be highlighted and thus addressed within the group.

Guidelines:

⇒ **Establish a consultation group of young people who are willing to express their views on a variety of issues**

⇒ **Establish a management team or committee in each group**

⇒ **Listen to suggestions within the group and act on these to reinforce the fact that their views are important. If a suggestion is not going to work talk through the potential problems with the group and let them problem solve**

⇒ **Liaise with local agencies in order to establish an exchange of information on local issues in order to gain an understanding of needs and issues in the area**

Help connect Early School Leavers back into education

There are a number of programmes which provide support to young early school leavers and to potential early school leavers.

Support for potential Early School Leavers

The National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) has a statutory function to ensure that all young people receive an education and are regularly attending school. Across Ireland, Educational Welfare Officers (EWO's) track young people under the age of 16 who truant excessively or who have left school early. Information on who the EWO is for a particular school or area can be found by calling the education helpline on 1890 363666.

In order to provide an integrated and cohesive approach to early school leaving and chronic truancy, the Home School Community Liasion Programme (HSCL), the School Completion Programme (SCP) and the Visiting Teachers Service for Travellers (VTST) have been integrated within the NEWB.

The NEWB have also developed a useful resource for schools called 'Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools'. It is a useful document for those working with young people who are under threat of suspension or expulsion from school as it outlines the legal and procedural requirements that should be met before these sanctions can occur. Each school will have an individual Code of Behaviour, however, this resource outlines the basic rights of any young person in the Irish school system. It may also be very useful in developing codes of behaviour for groups within a youth work setting.[xxiv]

Support for Early School Leavers

There may be a variety of programmes in your area but it is essential not to push a young person into a course when they are resistant. Youthreach, FÁS, Back to Education Initiatives and FETAC all provide different forms of education for young early school leavers. Contact details for all of these can be found in the contact portion of this section.

Keep up to date with relevant research

As with all statistics it is important not to lose sight of the real world implications for the 'numbers' contained within them. Being aware of the implications of early school leaving for young people, the demographics involved and the potential reasons for it will provide an opportunity to discuss the issue with a participant who has left school early. The 'Economic and Social Research Institute' regularly publishes research papers on the issue of early school leaving.

Policy

Your organisation should have a policy in place regarding the following:

⇒ **If a young early school leaver wishes to use the facility during school time, is this possible and does it affect your policy on truancy?**

⇒ **If your organisation provides education services and support, what are the policies regarding enrolment and participation?**

⇒ **If your organisation can not provide educational support, do you have a referral system in place to organise this for the young person?**

⇒ **What policy, if any, is in place regarding behavioural issues of early school leavers?**

⇒ **If behavioural issues are identified, do you provide personal development programmes such as anger management?**

⇒ **Do you have policies in place for dealing with young people with literacy issues? Is there an alternative to written forms, or is help provided for them?**

Checklist 5 - How Accessible is your Organisation to Early School Leavers?

This checklist can help you to identify how you can improve your service for early school leavers

Public image

How we present our service to our community

Partnerships:

- Our service has partnerships with local schools to help support young people at risk

  Yes   Partly   No

- We know the name of our local Education Welfare Officer

  Yes   Partly   No

Policies and procedures

We have a written commitment to deliver an equal and inclusive service

- Our service has clear guidelines and protocols with our local school(s) relating to truancy and behaviour codes for school related programmes

  Yes   Partly   No

Programme planning and delivery

Our programmes are designed and delivered to include the diverse needs and identities of early school leavers

- Our service provides a homework help service or refers young people to other homework help services

  Yes   Partly   No

Promotion :

- Our organisation uses a range of verbal communication strategies to promote our service

  Yes　Partly　No

- Young people do not need to be able to read or write to access our service

  Yes　Partly　No

Promoting literacy and numeracy skills:

- Our service incorporates literacy and numeracy skills into our programmes, including fun programmes

  Yes　Partly　No

- Our service provides educational support

  Yes　Partly　No

Connecting young people to education:

- Our service actively links young people back into education services such as school, Youthreach, FÁS local partnerships

  Yes　Partly　No

Professional development

Our staff and volunteers are trained and supported to deliver an inclusive youth service

- Staff receive training on equality issues and integration strategies

  Yes　Partly　No

Participation

We make sure we include the voices of young people at all levels of our youth service

- Our service consults with young people from a variety of educational backgrounds to assess arising needs and issued

  Yes　Partly　No

Useful Contacts

National Education Welfare Board

16-22 Green Street

Dublin 7

Phone: (01) 8738700

Lo call: 1890 363666

Fax: (01) 8738799

Email: info@newb.ie

Website: www.newb.ie

The NEWB has a statutory function to ensure that every child either attends a school or otherwise receives an education. Information on the Education Welfare Officer for a particular school/area can be obtained by calling the education helpline on 1890 363666.

School Completion Programme

Co-ordination Service

Curriculum Development Unit

Sundrive Road

Dublin 12

Phone: (01) 4535487

Fax: (01) 4020438

Email: scp@cdu.cdvec.ie

Website: www.education.ie

The School Completion programmes focus on those at risk of educational disadvantage and at risk of leaving school early. Schools involved in the programme devise focused and targeted integrated plans for the holistic support of young people.

Youthreach

c/o Curriculum Development Unit

Sundrive Road

Dublin 12

Phone: (01) 4535487

Fax: (01) 4020438

Email: youthreachinfo@cdu.cdvec.ie

Website: www.youthreach.ie

Youthreach have over 100 centres around Ireland. They provide second chance education directed at unemployed young early school leavers aged between 15 and 20. Youthreach offers participants the opportunity to identify and pursue viable options within adult life and an opportunity for participants to acquire certification. Youthreach operate year-round.

Vocational training

VTOS National Office
c/o Curriculum Development Unit
Sundrive Road
Dublin 12
Phone: (01) 4535487
Fax: (01) 4020438
Email: siobhan.mcquirk@cdu.cdvec.ie
Website: www.vtos.ie

VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme) offers programmes that are participant led, vocationally oriented and progression focused. They provide the opportunity to engage in learning at Junior and Leaving Certificate level as well as FETAC Level 3, 4 and 5 certificates.

Department of Justice Workshop Programmes
Please see www.probation.ie for contact details and details of a variety of community based projects and programmes.

Department of Education and Science
Marlborough Street,
Dublin 2
Locall: 1890 402040
Email: info@education.ie
Website: www.education.ie

FÁS Community Training Centres
27-33 Upper Baggott Street
Dublin 4
Phone: (01) 6070500
Fax: (01) 6070600
Email: info@fas.ie
Website: www.fas.ie

FÁS operate a variety of training and employment programmes as well as a recruitment service to jobseekers and employers.

Fáilte Ireland
88-95 Amien Street
Dublin 21
Phone: 1890 525525 or (01) 884 7700
Fax: (01) 855 6821
Email: courses@failteireland.ie
Website: www.failteireland.ie

Fáilte Ireland offer courses run in Institutes of Technology which promote careers in tourism and the hospitality industry.

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xxiii. Australian Centre for Equity through Education and the Australian Youth Research Centre, Building Relationships - making education work, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs

xxiv.   http://www.newb.ie/codes_of_behaviour_guidelines/introduction.asp