

It is a privilege for me to write for *Ireland's Education Yearbook* published by Education Matters as we sit on the cusp of major reform through the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector.

As with so many areas of society, the pandemic has highlighted the value of early learning and childcare. Professionals in the sector have gone above and beyond to ensure that children remain supported throughout the pandemic. Yet challenges persist. With low wages, many professionals working in the sector do not see a future for themselves in it; services are struggling to recruit and retain staff; and fees are unaffordable for many parents.

It is clear to me that these issues cannot be addressed in isolation, and that our response as a government must address them all in a coherent and interconnected way.

We have now set about that process of reform with two major reports published and approved by government in December 2021: 'Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare' and 'Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare'. Each represents the culmination of more than two years of work, and they set out the way forward for fundamental building blocks of the sector – the funding model and the workforce.

Partnership for the Public Good is the report of an independently chaired expert group to develop a new funding model. The group drew on detailed research, data, and other inputs which have been published throughout the process. This rigour clearly underpins all of the group's analysis and conclusions and hugely strengthens the report. It gives me great confidence and assurance about the recommendations arrived at.

Consultation and engagement with those involved in the sector – parents, workers, providers, and others – were other key ingredients in the success of this report. An iterative approach was taken over three phases, which started with seeking perspectives from a wide range of contributors and progressively became more detailed and specific, with a key reference group of representative groups and other stakeholders. This careful balancing of different views and interests comes across very clearly in the report.

The overarching theme of the report is reflected in the title: Partnership for the Public Good. It clearly and unequivocally recognises that early

The process of reform of Early Childhood Care & Education

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learning and childcare serves the public good – for children, for families, and for society and the economy more widely. These are crucial services, and the State has a strong interest in ensuring they are high-quality, affordable, inclusive, and sustainable. And this has to be achieved through a relationship of partnership with providers, working together for the public good. This emphasis marks a new departure for the State’s approach in the sector.

While acknowledging the many positives in the sector, the report does not shy away from the challenges: low pay, high fees, low investment, and the impact of market-driven approaches. But it provides a clear direction for how these issues can be addressed.

Central to the expert group’s recommendations is that a new supply-side approach to investment should be developed: core funding. Core funding is key to resolving the most challenging aspects of the current system and offers a new basis on which to build partnership between the State and providers. The group recommends building on core funding with additional funding and supports, both targeted and universal, to tackle disadvantage.

We have already set in motion this funding-model reform. 2022 will see a transformative and groundbreaking package of measures introduced to begin to implement the vision set out in the group’s report. €78 million is being made available to enable this, including €69 million for a core funding stream, equivalent to €207 million in a full year. Core funding will support the establishment of an employment regulation order to improve pay and conditions in the sector, ensure stability and sustainability for services, improve quality of provision, and freeze parental fees so that the full affordability benefits of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) can be realised.

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The new funding elements – core funding and funding to tackle disadvantage – are designed to operate alongside the ECCE programme and the NCS, with developments to both, to make up an integrated and reinforcing model of funding to deliver a range of policy objectives. Full details of this new model are described in the report.

The initial implementation of core funding from 2022 is the start of a transformational change, and what I hope will be a multi-annual programme of investment to substantially increase public funding for early learning and care and school-age childcare. In addition to supporting quality developments and service sustainability, the new funding model will also make early learning and childcare substantially more affordable for families. Core funding will enable the introduction of a fee management system which, in tandem with developments to the NCS, will significantly reduce out-of-pocket costs for parents. Fee management will start with a requirement for providers not to increase fees on September 2021 levels. The fee management system will be further developed in subsequent years.

Having met so many early learning and childcare providers and professionals, I know the dedication and care they devote to their job. They deserve recognition for the work they do, and a career pathway for the job they love. That is why I have launched Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early

Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022–2028. It complements the expert group’s report on the funding model, because the workforce – early years educators, school-age childcare practitioners, and childminders – are the very heart of the services with which government works in partnership.

While funding is critical, it is those working in the sector – supporting children’s development, learning, and well-being, working in partnership with families – who ensure that early learning and childcare bring so many benefits. They do not yet receive the recognition they deserve. Unfortunately, many continue to leave the sector because they do not see a future for themselves in it. The Covid-19 pandemic has compounded the challenges and pressures in a sector that has shown consistent dedication in its work with children and families.

I would particularly like to pay tribute to early years educators, school-age childcare practitioners, and childminders at this time, when the pandemic is causing so much disruption, stress, and worry. Those working in this sector have made an enormous contribution, and I would like to acknowledge that. They deserve public recognition for their commitment and their professionalism.

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Nurturing Skills aims to build on that professionalism and actively support the workforce in continuing its professional journey. The actions it sets out provide a roadmap for the next steps in the workforce’s journey towards professionalisation. Key actions include:

- new financial supports to assist early years educators to study while continuing to work in the sector
- supporting school-age childcare practitioners to meet new qualification requirements that will be introduced incrementally over the coming years
- supporting staff recruitment, retention, and diversity in the workforce.

Actions to develop career pathways and support staff recruitment will complement efforts under way to improve pay and conditions of employment in the sector. In particular, a key enabler for Nurturing Skills will be the Joint Labour Committee for Early Years Services, which was recently established following a process I began in December 2020.

Likewise, the core funding – announced in Budget 2022 and set out in Partnership for the Public Good – will support service providers to meet higher costs arising from pay increases, without raising fees for parents.

Together these reports will result in significant reform of the relationship between the State and the services and workers who are so critical in delivering high-quality early learning and care and school-age childcare. Over the years ahead, they will strengthen the quality of provision, support affordability and access, and provide a new basis for ensuring that public investment in the sector works for the public good, working in partnership with service providers and their staff to support children and families.