

Student Absenteeism: Time for a Rethink

Background

Arrangements for implementing legislation on compulsory school attendance remained unchanged in the Republic of Ireland for most of the 20th century. The structure devolved responsibility for enforcing the legislation, the School Attendance Act (1926), mainly to An Garda Síochána, with a school attendance service operating in a limited number of county borough areas, including Dublin, Cork, Limerick, and Waterford. School principals were required to make weekly attendance returns identifying absentees. If visits to the family did not secure improvements, provision was made for enforcement, including committing the child to an industrial school if the problem persisted.

These arrangements reflected the view that irregular school attendance arose because of parental negligence. Enforcement was largely punitive, and welfare issues were largely disregarded. In due course, this approach began to be questioned. A committee chaired by District Justice Eileen Kennedy reported on the operation of reformatory and industrial schools in 1970. Because some students in these institutions arrived there as a result of the school-attendance legislation, the Kennedy Report addressed that issue:

The School Attendance system is not working satisfactorily and requires re-examination. The School Attendance Acts should, therefore, be reviewed and revised where necessary. (Kennedy, 1970, p.82)

The Conroy Commission reported on the role of the Gardaí in that year also. It recommended that enforcement of school-attendance regulations was not an appropriate function for the organisation. Other than those few areas with a school attendance service, the legislation was rarely implemented in the latter half of the



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This year is the 125th anniversary of the introduction of compulsory school attendance into Irish education. Despite three policy iterations in that period, statistics show high levels of student absenteeism currently in many schools. It is a complex problem that is difficult to tackle effectively, and it has serious implications also for these students' peers. This article examines the phenomenon in the light of research and the response of the Irish education system to it over the years.

20th century. Various groups produced suggestions for reform, and, eventually, important legislation emerged.

The Education Welfare Act (2000)

The Education Welfare Act incorporated a move away from the punitive approach, though the possibility of legal action remained as an option. All children aged 6–16 were obliged to attend school or otherwise receive an education in the form of homeschooling or in a place other than a formally recognised school. Provision was made for establishing a National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) to be responsible for implementing the legislation and to appoint educational welfare officers (EWOs).

Parents were required to explain absences, whether full-day or partial. Schools were required to keep records of attendance, as was the norm, and to supply detailed returns to the NEWB. Also addressed were admissions policies and arrangements for student suspension or expulsion. The vision was articulated clearly by the Minister for Education, Micheál Martin, when he introduced the Bill in Seanad Éireann in 1999. He stressed that the focus was on addressing the causes of non-attendance rather than applying sanctions:

The general aim of the Bill is to provide for a comprehensive, national system for ensuring that children of compulsory school-going age attend school or, if they do not attend school, that they receive at least a minimum education. (Seanad Éireann, 1999)

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A complex problem

Erratic school attendance has been widely researched in various jurisdictions. The complexity of the problem is underlined by the fact that scholars from such a range of disciplines – including education, social work, sociology, law, criminology, psychology, psychiatry, and medicine – have chosen to research the issue.

Schools' annual statistical returns include details of the number of days 'lost' by their student cohort. They also specify the number of students who were absent for 20 days or more in any given year, usually described in research as 'chronic' absentees. The national picture that emerges is disappointing. Over the decade to 2017/18 there was an insignificant change in the number of days lost and a small reduction in the percentage of chronic absentees.

The figures also give us a useful insight into the impact of poverty and disadvantage on school-attendance patterns. Chronic absenteeism tends to be about twice as prevalent in DEIS post-primary schools compared with non-DEIS ones.

Recently, Tusla released figures for school attendance in 2019–2022, which suggest that the unavoidable move to online learning may have impacted negatively on many students. In that context the Minister's decision to drop the Covid Learning and Supports Scheme (CLASS) after one year will prove to have been a very retrograde step. However, the disruption caused by Covid-19 means that interpreting patterns might prove unreliable. So instead I am relying on the summary of the 2017/18 figures produced by Denner and Cosgrove (2020).

Resources

The very limited progress in tackling this issue highlights its complexity but also raises questions about the resources provided to tackle it. In 2001, research was commissioned on the NEWB's organisational and staffing needs. The report (Rochford, 2002) recommended that a staff complement of 360 would be necessary, 300 of them EWOs. Former NEWB board and senior staff members, interviewed in the course of researching this issue, all maintain that from the start there was no real commitment on the part of the Department of Education to provide the necessary resources.

Certainly, the resources provided never even came close to those identified as necessary by the Rochford report. To put it in context, the current staffing level is fewer than 150 EWOs: one for about every 30 schools, on average. The latest figure for chronic absentees is over 113,000 children and young people between primary and post-primary (Denner & Cosgrove, 2020, p.10). That represents 750 chronic absentees, on average, for each EWO. There are also thousands more, in any given year, who don't reach the 20-day threshold, whose absenteeism is problematic and where intervention is needed before it escalates.

Of course, school personnel, home school community liaison officers (HSCLs), and others are also working on the issue. Again, for context, this time with a DEIS post-primary school of say 700 pupils: Denner and Cosgrove's (2020) research suggests that such a school will have 165 chronic attenders. Can it be seriously argued that one HSCL, with some help from colleagues filling part-time roles as year heads, together with an EWO who has an unrealistic workload, is in a position to bring about significant change?

Since the Act became law there have been notable changes in how it is administered. Nine years after the NEWB was established in 2002, it was placed under the aegis of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs; in 2014 its functions were assigned to Tusla, whose budget was determined by the Department of Children. Early in 2021, responsibility for legislation, policy, and budgetary matters was assigned to the Department of Education, but operationally the service remains under Tusla, and all its employees are Tusla staff members.

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The whole saga seems like a game of pass-the-parcel. Taking that together with the failure to provide the necessary resources, it is reasonable to ask whether the government is serious about addressing this problem.

Conclusion

We know that failure to address school absenteeism effectively can have serious consequences. Firstly, irregular attendance at school can have a lifelong impact on those involved under various headings (Darmody et al., 2008). Secondly, often overlooked is the negative impact on peers. If erratic attendance is pervasive within a group of students, at a minimum the rhythm of teaching is disrupted, to the detriment of regular attenders. The impact of absenteeism in DEIS school communities is clear from recent research (Fleming, 2020).

Finally there is the point made in the Kennedy report, and by many working in schools, that erratic attendance may in some cases be a symptom of complex problems that need to be addressed urgently. There is evidence, anecdotal and otherwise, to suggest that our current cohort of younger citizens are more prone to suffering from mental health challenges than previous generations. More than two decades after the Education Welfare Act was enacted, an independent evaluation and reform are overdue.

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