

Investing in Early Years and School-Age Care as a Public Good

Background

The concept of regarding the early years and school-age care system as a public good has gained momentum in Ireland in 2024. As we go into 2025 with potentially a new government and Minister, it is important to maintain this momentum. During 2024 we have witnessed a perceptible shift in public discourse on early years and school-age care, state involvement, and who the system should benefit.

In 2021, the expert group responsible for developing *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* argued that children's participation in high-quality early years and school-age care delivers benefits to society. Current public discourse indicates that this has now been recognised, leading to growing acceptance that our early years and school-age care system is a public good.

Results of marketisation

But the question posed by Professor Eva Lloyd and others is one we should scrutinise: Can a marketised system fully deliver high quality and a public good? And is this a reasonable expectation? It's worth considering these questions through the lens of the recruitment and retention issues that perennially affect the system, its capacity, and its impact on children and families. The educators and practitioners who are the backbone of a high-quality system remain undervalued in a marketised system that has consistently delivered low average wages, precarious employment, and poor terms and conditions.

The Employment Regulation Order, with which settings must comply to participate in Core Funding, and which was increased in 2024, stands at €13.65. This is €0.95



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Workers in the early years and school-age care system in Ireland remain undervalued in a marketised system. This article shows how regarding the system as a public good has gained momentum in 2024, and it makes the case for investing in the sector to deliver on the promise of high-quality provision, despite the bias towards capital expenditure on infrastructure rather than human capital.

above the national minimum wage – an indictment of how society values these professionals, without whom consistent, high-quality provision is impossible. Furthermore, the Living Wage Technical Group’s estimate of the 2024–25 Irish living wage stands at €14.80, outstripping the agreed rates for the recognised roles of educator, school-age care practitioner, school-age care coordinator, and lead educator. The national living wage is due to replace the national minimum wage in 2026.

Many employers exceed these rates and work hard to value their employees, but the negotiated rates are what the system has delivered to date. To fully deliver high quality for children, we need to carefully consider if the public good can be served by the system as it is. Will a marketised system ever value these professionals and elevate them to the status that reflects their qualifications and experience and the high quality they are expected to deliver?

Worth the investment?

Research confirms that funding for an early years and school-age care system is one of the highest-returning large-scale investments for government. Some governments view this as contributing to the development of human capital, as it lays the foundation for skills development and lifelong learning. Any educator will agree. Studies estimate that such investments yield high societal returns, surpassing even those associated with infrastructural projects, for example.

However, in Ireland, like the UK, there remains a bias towards capital expenditure on fixed assets such as roads, buildings, and other infrastructure projects, rather than on human capital. The argument then is one of how we view investment in the system, and whether such funding really will deliver the benefits associated with a public good. As supported by much research, my view is that our early years and school-age care system *is* an asset to Ireland, and is a public good that provides benefits – social and economic – to all society.

Conclusion

What 2024 has made clear is that the thinking around the early years and school-age care system in Ireland has shifted. The system, delivered by providers, educators, practitioners, coordinators, and managers, has begun to be recognised as a public good – the public good is becoming public knowledge. There is now political impetus to move this forward, with most of the major political parties setting their sights on overhauling the system.

But to truly reap the benefits of this public good, full recognition is needed, and more work needs to be done. A public good to vindicate the right of every child to access high-quality experiences in an equitable system needs to become

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normalised by those who work in it, and by policymakers, advocates, and the public. We should consider whether the current system will deliver this public good; after all, according to systems thinking, *the purpose of a system is what it does*.

Elevating the workforce to the level of primary school teachers and recognising their centrality to this public good is a vital first step. This will enable the expansion of capacity which, alongside better planning, will enhance the delivery of an early years and school-age care system that is fit for purpose. This can be achieved through a political vision for the system, and by increasing the investment targets to bring us in line with our EU neighbours.

Challenges facing the Early Childhood Care and Education sector



The Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth published its Report on the challenges facing the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector.

A report, ***Challenges facing the Early Childhood Care and Education sector***, from the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth, was published in March 2024.

The Report made a series of recommendations.

Speaking about the report, Deputy Kathleen Funchion, Cathaoirleach of the Committee said:

"We are at a point in time when there is unanimous acknowledgement of the value of positive early interventions in children's lives."

"Investment in children's early years is the greatest leveller in terms of delivering positive outcomes. The starting point for addressing these issues is now children's rights, which is a marked improvement on former attitudes towards Early Childhood Care and Education as a 'women's issue' or a labour activation tool."