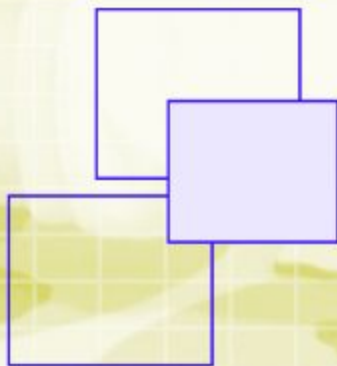


OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland





The OECD Thematic Review

Thematic reviews of early childhood policy originated in response to a significant change in Western societies in the latter part of the 20th century. In effect, the care and education of young children in the industrialised world had shifted from the private to the public sphere, to become a shared responsibility of families and the state. Not only was the provision of equal access to women to the labour market an important goal in this development, but also the issue of giving every child a fair start in life and at school.

To evaluate the progress of countries in the early childhood field and to communicate examples of successful public policy, the OECD launched in 1998 a series of voluntary national thematic reviews. Twenty countries responded, among them Ireland. In 2002, the Department of Education and Science invited the OECD Directorate for Education to conduct a review of early childhood policies and services in the country.

For the review, the OECD review team spent a week in Ireland in November 2002, observing and consulting with the various policy-makers and providers of early childhood education and care. It was agreed with the OECD team that the Irish Review would focus on **co-ordination, access and quality** in early childhood provision. A *Background Report* was commissioned by the Department of Education and Science on developments in policy and practice in early childhood provision in Ireland. This Report was prepared in consultation with relevant Departments, agencies and stakeholders in Ireland.

What the Review says about....

Enhancing Co-ordination...

At National Level the Report recommends:

- The integration of all early education and care policy and funding under one department or under a designated funding and policy agency.
- The urgent formulation of a *National Plan for Early Childhood Services Development*, rolled over on a three-year basis, with clearly spelt out goals, targets, time-lines, responsibilities and accountability measures from co-operating Departments. While universal in intent, the plan should include annual targets and specific funding for important subsystems, such as disadvantaged children, children from Traveller communities and children with special needs.







- The implementation of the *White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (1999), and where children with special learning needs are concerned, the *Recommendations of the National Forum of Early Childhood Education* (1998).
- The establishment of an *Early Years Development Unit* (EYDU) within the Department of Education and Science.
- An overhaul of the existing *National Childcare Committee* so as to create – with renewed Department of Education and Science participation – a focused *National Policy Committee for Early Education and Care*. The Committee will aim to ensure that the different Departmental policies are consistent, interlocking and properly resourced.
- The decentralisation of the practical organisation, integration and management of early childhood education and care services to local agencies or committees (Early Education and Childcare Committees) at the county/city level, backed by adequate regulatory powers and state funding.

What the Review says about...

Expanding Access...

For Children aged 0-3 years – the Childcare Sector - the Report recommends:

- The establishment of a nationwide network of *Child and Family Centres* in each county and city to model exemplary programmes, and to act as training and administrative centres for early childhood and family policy. In the provision of such centres, liaison and common funding across the government agencies is strongly recommended.
- Consideration be given to lengthening parental leave to one year with the guarantee of job protection, in order to provide parental care for children in the crucial first year of life, and to improve over the long term the retention of women in the labour market.
- A needs assessment be undertaken in each county. Access information should be made available to parents.
- An increase in the supply of childcare places for young children one year and older through accrediting and subsidising quality childminders, encouraging them to form at county level accredited family daycare networks.
- The provision of professionally managed drop-in services for at-home mothers with young children.







- The removal of barriers to affordability for low- and modest-income families through capping parental fees and providing operational subsidies to accredited centre-based or networked providers for each eligible child present in their services.

For Children aged 3-6 years – the Education Sector - the Report recommends:

- The expansion of access to all 3-6 year old children (as in other European countries), including full-day services and out of school care. A goal to be achieved is to guarantee to every child a free morning education session, followed in the afternoon when necessary by a subsidised, fee-paying pre-school session. To avoid transporting young children and for reasons of economy, consideration should be given to using the local school or adjoining premises for afternoon sessions. If accreditation is given, the community/voluntary sector and private providers can also participate and receive the normative public grant or childcare/pre-school subsidy.
- An immediate entitlement for all 4-year olds (irrespective of the month in which they were born) to a free education place in school or pre-school settings. Where the infant school is concerned, the measure could be made acceptable to both parents and teachers by the provision of a trained Child Assistant to all infant classes, thus effectively reducing child-staff ratios for this age group to a maximum of 15:1.
- Departmental accreditation and financial support be given to selected voluntary, community and private organisations that are capable of delivering high quality developmental programmes.
- Increased investment in community outreach and training to ensure that parents can effectively participate in consultative measures and management positions within early childhood and school structures.

For Children with disabilities the Report recommends:

- The urgent implementation of the recommendations of the *National Forum of Early Childhood Education (1998)*, in relation to children with special needs, including specific legislation and a comprehensive national system of inclusive services for children with special needs.





For Children from disadvantaged backgrounds the Report recommends:

- The development of a system for the identification of children not enrolled in education in their fourth year, thus allowing for early intervention where necessary.
- Increased provision for children from disadvantaged backgrounds that is multi-dimensional, engages families and is co-ordinated with other relevant agencies.
- The gradual extension of the present half day *Early Start* project to whole day education and care, the afternoon sessions being provided by community providers. Other improvements to the initiative may be envisaged, such as increased networking of *Early Start* professionals, enhanced outreach to parents, more appropriate programming, and better integration of school and community services.

For Children from the Traveller community the Report recommends:

- The urgent implementation of the Department of Education and Science evaluation report *Pre-School for Travellers*.
- The Department of Education and Science to evaluate annually the actual outcomes for Traveller children.
- The Department of Education and Science to introduce a mentoring service for Traveller children to support them through primary and secondary education.
- Consideration be given to the appointment of representatives from the Traveller community to the relevant policy bodies dealing with early childhood, primary and secondary education.
- In line with the recommendations of the *White Paper on Early Education* (1999), a growing number of Traveller teachers and child assistants should be trained and recruited.



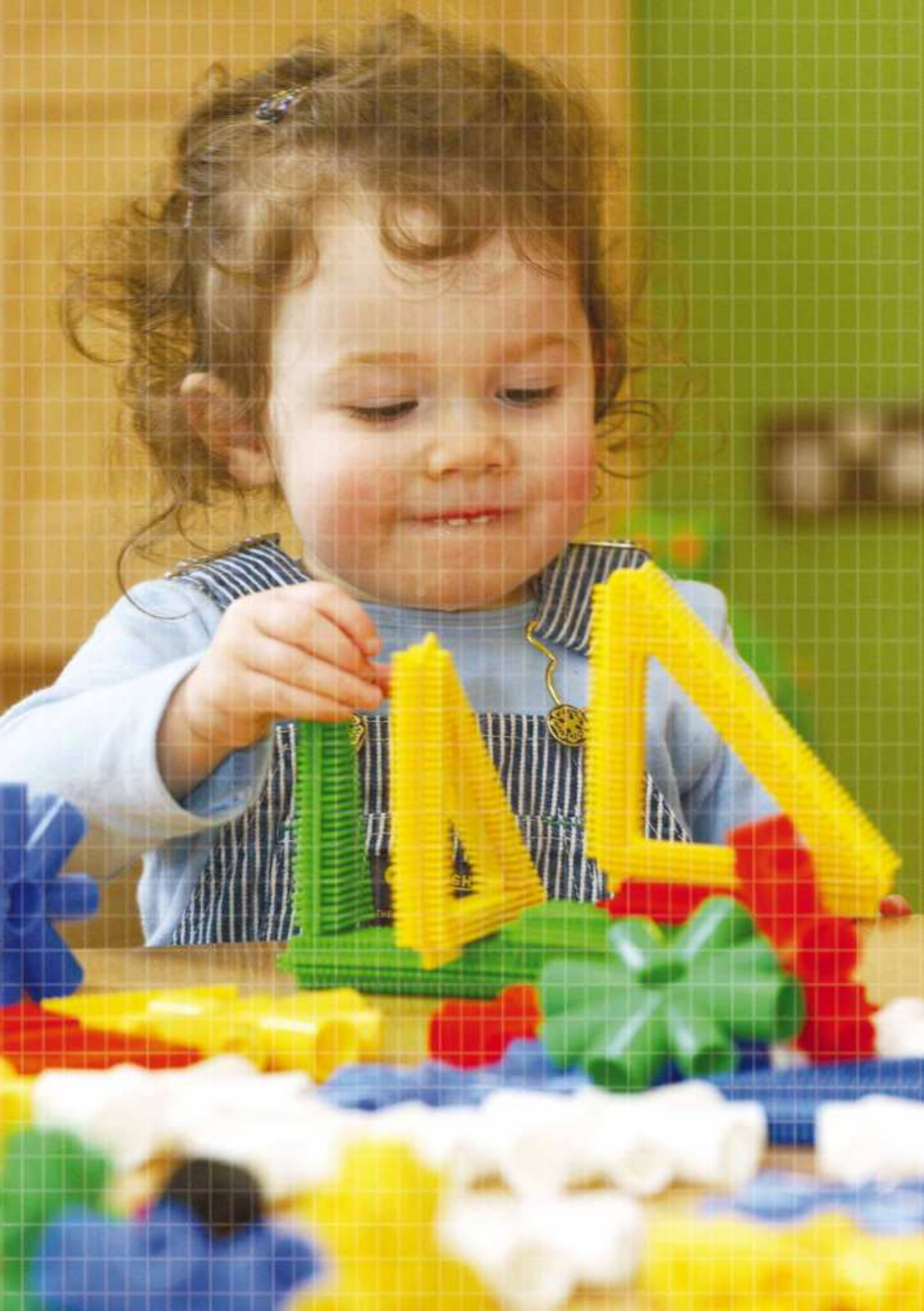


What the Review says about....

Improving Quality...

For the Childcare and Education Sectors, the report recommends:

- The formulation of a common *National Goals and Quality Framework* for all centre-based programmes for young children, focussing on agreed standards for services.
- The development of a voluntary accreditation and quality improvement scheme for service providers, linked to funding, and focussing on management, staffing and programme requirements, developmental goals and ongoing pedagogical monitoring and support.
- The development of a strong training infrastructure at county/city level for early childhood professionals based on the policy document *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (Government of Ireland, 2002).
- The creation of quality guidelines for the reception of younger children aged 4-8 years into primary school.
- The introduction of a more active and experientially-based pedagogy in infant classes to replace a predominantly didactic approach.
- The provision of a separate budget for each infant school and specific management responsibility to be given to the senior infant school teacher.
- The provision of strong pre-service training for early childhood teachers in the training colleges. Until this can be created and introduced, it is recommended that an in-service training system be organised and funded for all teachers in the infant classes, in particular for the senior teachers with managerial responsibility.
- The provision of at least one inspector at regional level with a background and training in early education. Formative self-evaluation is also encouraged.
- The further expansion of information and engagement policies for parents both at local and national levels.
- The roll out of strengthened research, evaluation and data collection systems.





To Find Out More...

The full versions of the *OECD Country Note* and the *Irish Background Report* commissioned by the Department of Education and Science, are available for download from the OECD website at www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood or the Department of Education and Science website at www.education.ie

Hardcopies may be obtained by contacting:

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