

National Educational Welfare Board

Public Accounts Committee meeting 24<sup>th</sup> November 2011



CEO Opening Statement

Good morning Chair and Members of the Public Accounts Committee. My name is Clare Ryan and I was appointed Chief Executive Officer of the NEWB in May of this year. I am extremely pleased to be here today to be able to respond on progress achieved since the publication in 2010 of Special Report 74 of the Comptroller & Auditor General on Monitoring School Attendance, to share with you some of the really good things that we are doing in NEWB, some of the challenges that are facing us and some of our future plans. I am with Dan O'Shea, Regional Manager for the EWS and Laura Slevin, Director of Corporate Services.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's report offered a clearly defined agenda which was embraced by the NEWB. This coincided opportunely with the extended remit of the service to include at the time the Visiting Teacher for Traveller Service, Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Programme and offered the opportunity of redeveloping an integrated service model which would respond to the complexity of issues that impact on attendance, participation and retention. This complexity requires deep and sustained system interventions.

Since 2010, we can report a number of positive developments which undoubtedly reflect an enhanced model of service.

- In relation to **children**, in this current year, through the EWS service we have supported in excess of 8700 children. We are pleased that the changes which we have made since 2009 have resulted in this improvement and this will further strengthen as we continue to develop and refine a model of integrated service to children and families - incorporating the extended NEWB in an agreed framework working on attendance, participation and retention.
- In relation to **Attendance and Retention:**
  - There has been the highest annual attendance returns ever to the NEWB from schools in 2009/10: **97%** from Primary and **96%** from Post Primary
  - In 09-10 **69,471** days **less** than 08-09 have been lost through student absences (on a % comparison)
  - The numbers of student days lost (taking primary and post primary schools together) is running at 6.8% and is at the lower end for the five year period 2005 to 2010
  - The percentage of students who sit the Leaving Certificate overall has risen by more than 6% to 87.7% in 8 years.

These figures demonstrate an important return on the State's investment as we know, that, for every child diverted from early school leaving and towards higher educational achievement there are considerable long-term social and economic benefits.

- We now have a **management** team which is concentrating on how we make a difference to the lives of children in Ireland with our shared resources: 408 HSCL Coordinators, 254 School Completion Programme project workers and 93 staff in the Educational Welfare Service.
- In terms of **staff** - the integration project has been firmly centred upon the requirement to build a unified education support service guided and informed by research evidence, policy and the experience of teachers, parents, students, service staff and communities. We know that people are passionate about the principle of “One Child, One Team, One Plan” and want to make it a reality. The Board is committed to implementing a unified service of support for the academic year 2012-2013.

### **Progress on Integration**

1. The Memorandum of Agreement between DES and NEWB is now the bedrock on which all planning for the future is based. This is fully understood by the management team, which gives clarity about the scope and boundaries of integration. There is a commitment to using integration to achieve better outcomes for children, families and schools
2. There has been a successful transitioning of personnel from Department of Education and Skills to NEWB and of the NEWB to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.
3. There has been positive engagement with key stakeholders in order to secure agreement for the approach to service redesign and restructuring
4. The final stages of a detailed implementation plan are in train. These include: practice guidelines for all staff on a model of integrated practice; the design of Continuous Professional Development to support integrated practice; The bedding in of organisational systems including funding guidelines, reporting arrangements, data gathering requirements and on-going monitoring and evaluation of impact
5. During the past 2 years in particular there have been locally based initiatives which have demonstrated integrated practice working at its best. These include: working with Care Teams in schools to create an environment that is conducive to good attendance and participation; building good relationships with school management and staff to improve integrated working; impressive team work by HSCL, SCP and EWS; positive initiatives to encourage pupils attendance; targeting of children and tracking their progress; whole community initiatives which have involved other agencies/providers; group work with parents that will enable them to support their peers; work with the traveller community supporting participation and retention and leading to positive outcomes; and promoting a culture of inclusion and using a strengths led approach to assessing needs, rather than a deficit model.

## Challenges

The challenges facing us are principally to do with change processes:

- The challenge of change itself. It is never easy for people to embrace change especially when it means that some of the practices, values and principles which they hold dear may have to change, in order to create a more efficient and effective service which will produce better outcomes for children, families and schools.
- The resource challenge. It is clear that we live in unprecedented times and NEWB is committed to ensuring that whatever resources are granted to its activities and services that best possible value is obtained whilst ensuring that the most marginalised children and families are prioritised.
- The outcomes challenge. NEWB puts children at the centre of everything that we do. While we have developed an outcomes framework for the EWS, this is currently being refined to incorporate the entire service strands of HSCL and SCP.

## The Future

- We believe that the Department of Education and Skills made a bold and correct move in requiring a single strategic approach to attendance, participation and retention and we can confirm that the organisation is firmly committed to making this deliver for children and families.
- We are currently developing an integrated pathway for children under a common case management framework. This means that any child who has a need for support from any of the strands of NEWB should in the future receive a seamless service. The new framework will be in place for the new academic year 2012-2013.
- The Board has placed a huge emphasis on re-engaging the commitment and co-operation of schools. My own appointment in May of this year, having come from the education sector is facilitating this process. As an organisation, we are committed to continuing to build and consolidate strong relationships with schools and school communities so that together we can ensure that the absolute entitlement to education is preserved and protected for all children, particularly the most vulnerable.
- NEWB has commenced work on developing, under Section 22 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, guidelines for schools on the formulation of Attendance Strategies. The guidelines will act as a support to schools and families in offering clarity around roles, responsibilities and process as well as offering a descriptor of best practice in terms of ensuring that children remain engaged in the learning system.

Chairman, members of the Public Accounts Committee, attendance at school - the opportunity for each child to participate meaningfully in the educational system - is for the Board our raison d'être.

Absenteeism is one of the strongest factors associated with early school leaving and we know through research the enduring outcomes from high levels of poor achievement and absenteeism.

We know that even while still in school students who miss large amounts of school time can experience social and emotional costs through alienation from peers and staff.

We also know that children who leave school early tend not to re-engage with education subsequently and therefore remain at a disadvantage throughout their lives.

Combating the issues underlying poor attendance requires concerted action and close collaboration among schools, school support services and other stakeholders involved with children, young people and their families. I am committed to making that happen.

Clare Ryan

CEO  
NEWB

22 November 2011