



**Opening Statement by the Yellow Flag Programme to the Joint Committee on key issues affecting the Traveller community**

**19 November 2019**

Chairperson and Senators,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon on the topic of Education. My input here is as the Development Worker of the Yellow Flag Programme and I am joined by the Director of the Irish Traveller Movement.

The Yellow Flag Programme is an innovative whole school initiative which supports schools to celebrate diversity, promote inclusion and challenge racism. Pioneered initially by the Irish Traveller Movement as an intercultural innovative solution to address poor educational experiences and outcomes for Travellers, it took account of similar exclusion and marginalisation faced by other ethnic minorities and created a programme to encompass children from both majority and minority backgrounds, including Travellers. The programme is goal centred and accreditation focused under which schools are obliged to meet targets over a comprehensive 8 step strategy. It is not an optional soft choice programme but one that requires change to be monitored and visible both in the student population, and amongst the staff and the community.

The Yellow Flag Programme recognises the risk factors and the potential for Traveller and other ethnic minority children to experience disconnection and insecurity within schools and so the whole-school approach is vital to fostering positive identity amongst all pupils. However, even with efforts towards Yellow Flag accreditation, school bias and discrimination towards Travellers is so ingrained that in addressing racism amongst diverse groups – often teachers and school management are blind to the experience of Travellers and their and the schools' unconscious bias.

Factors such as identity based exclusion, historical prejudice, conscious and unconscious bias, absence of Travellers in teaching and school management, institutional racism, and poor awareness or knowledge of Traveller culture within teaching practice all have a detrimental effect on young Traveller's education progression and learning, and on their sense of identity and self-belief.

As per the National Traveller Survey 2017, 4 out of 10 Travellers said they were bullied in school.

In 2017, the Department of Justice and Equality commissioned an ERSI report 'A Social Portrait of Travellers' which found Travellers are over 50 times more likely to leave school without the Leaving Certificate in comparison to the non-Traveller population.

Even within Yellow Flag schools, racism towards Travellers dramatically increases in post-primary settings, and it is not uncommon to find examples of Traveller students who were actively involved in their Yellow Flag primary schools and dropped out after their transition to a secondary school that was not involved in the Yellow Flag Programme.

Since 2009, the Yellow Flag Programme has worked with eighty-seven schools (sixty-one primary and twenty-six post-primary) - a significant number, given the limited resources available to the Programme. The programme has reached 33,535 students and more than 2,600 teachers.

Yet 53% of the pupils who took part in the Intercultural Surveys in 2019 as part of the programme reported that they had witnessed racist comments or behaviours towards others in their schools.

This is why the following recommendations are very important:

- To be able to strengthen and secure the long-term impact it can have on the Irish education system, the Yellow Flag Programme needs to be mainstreamed across all primary and secondary schools. In addition to addressing the demand that already exists, it is imperative to reach out to schools with very few or no Traveller students as well. To really impact Traveller participation, retention and progression in the education system, it would be valuable to introduce a Yellow Flag model for pre-school and third-level settings.
- Anti-racist and intercultural training as part of the continuous professional development for teaching staff should be mandatory to actively inform the school staff to be mindful of their behaviour towards students from minority ethnic groups, especially Travellers.

- Strong legislation towards a national Anti-Racism Policy for schools is essential to encourage the Traveller community to remain in school and therefore reduce barriers to accessing second and third-level education.

Clear links with the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs would be critical in achieving long-term impact. However, to date, no concrete connection has been established despite our efforts.

I am happy to answer any questions the Committee Members might have.

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