

SUBMISSION/OPENING STATEMENT TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

Thank you for the invitation to address the Committee on the topic of education and the Traveller community with particular reference to school completion rates and educational attainment compared to the settled community.

There is no doubt that this is an issue that needs to be urgently addressed as statistics show that Traveller's progression rates from Junior to Senior level Post-Primary and from Post-Primary to Further and Higher Education are well below the levels of their non-Traveller peers. According to the 2011 Census, only 8% of Travellers completed education to Leaving Certificate Level compared to 73% of non-Travellers and only 1% of Travellers aged 25-64 had a degree compared with 30% of non-Travellers.

These statistics are stark and they need to be changed.

I want to touch on what I considered to be the main issues and I am conscious that I speak as a non-Traveller: so the first point I wish to make is that listening to the voices of Travellers and acting on what they say is crucial.

As a member of the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills and also as co-chair of the Cross Party Group on Travellers issues, I have had the opportunity to do that. The Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills has produced a report on issues of transition in the Education system and an interim report on Reduced Timetables which we are working on progressing with the Department.

During the course of our hearings on progression, we learned that a proportionately very large number of Traveller children are subjected to so-called "reduced timetables" which are, effectively, exclusion from school for long periods of time which, up to now, are very much at the discretion of the school with little or no consultation with parents. We learned that children with special needs are also subject to such discrimination and they also presented to the committee. As a result of these hearings and our recommendations, I am confident that there will be radical changes in how these measures are used, or not used, in the future.

The fundamental issue at stake here is every child's right to an Education, which is guaranteed in the Irish Constitution, Bunracht na hÉireann. A rights-based approach is fundamental to getting the changes necessary to ensure that children in the Traveller community have full access and full support to Education.

The other issue that underpins progress is understanding and validation of the Traveller way of life so that both Traveller and settled children and teachers understand each other's identity, have confidence in their own and value diversity in the school and educational environment. This, of course, affects many other children who are at risk of misunderstanding, as well as Travellers.

For that reason, I welcome Senator Kelleher's Bill and will work with others to ensure that it progresses through the Dáil as it has in the Seanad.

Many of the initiatives contained in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) have not yet been implemented since the launch of the Strategy in June 2017. These need to be tracked and followed through. I would also suggest that the re-instatement of the Traveller Education

Advisory Committee would provide a mechanism for issues affecting Traveller progression in Education to be brought directly to the Minister by Travellers themselves.

There are some specific programmes that could make a real difference if they were provided nationwide. I am thinking of a young man from Galway who addressed the Education Committee and told us of an after-school programme that he attended that gave him one-on-one support with difficulties he had in achieving his potential in school and helped him to progress to third level. Mainstreaming programmes that work has the potential to make a significant difference.

I look forward to the recommendations of this Committee across all areas; we need to have mechanisms and monitoring to ensure they are implemented.

In relation to the recommendations you will make on Education, I think it will be important that we in the Education Committee work with you to ensure that our work and yours contributes to positive change for Traveller children and their families.