

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) opening statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community on the topic of education and the Traveller community with particular reference to school completion rates and educational attainment, particularly at second and third level compared to the settled population.

December 2019

On behalf of Education and Training Boards Ireland, and the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) that ETBI represents, I am very pleased to make this statement to the Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community to contribute to the review of Traveller Issues.

ETBs are statutory authorities which have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate community national schools, second-level schools, further education colleges, and a range of adult and further education centres in communities throughout Ireland.

ETBs have a long-standing tradition of supporting the educational development of members of the Traveller Community. As state schools, ETB schools are open to all pupils regardless of any aspect of their identity, the culture of which is underpinned by the core values of:

- Excellence in Education
- Care
- Equality
- Community
- Multidenominational

In preparation, and to inform this submission to the Committee, ETBI references the views and experiences of Directors of Schools, Directors of Further Education and Training and ETB school management.

Education and Training Boards provide access to a range of education programmes in both the post primary and further education and training sectors as part of its broad educational

provision and prioritises delivering a responsive educational service to member of the Traveller Community as a significant target group, particularly at further education level. ETBs have a long-standing tradition of supporting the educational development of all members of the community, regardless of ethnic or cultural background. As state schools, ETB schools are open to all pupils regardless of any aspect of their identity.

At post primary level research in the education sector has long reflected the importance of family engagement in education as a driver of improved student achievement, reduced absenteeism and raised expectations for parents and guardians. Positive connections between family, community and school supports provides for greater engagement with formal schooling, leading to a positive impact on access and retention rates.

These research findings have been demonstrated in our response from schools with traveller students, who have highlighted the perceived low status of the benefit of education and the traveller parents/guardians negative experience of schools as key influencers of low participations rates. Often challenged by the complexities of the formal school system and engaging with school authorities, parents/guardians of traveller students frequently disengage from an environment that is more often than not perceived to be outside their comfort zone.

Separately it was noted by schools in our sector that the loss of the Visiting Teacher for Travellers Service in recent years had further compounded the communication challenges and opportunities for meaningful connections, which had been embedded and valued. While we acknowledge the abolition may have been in line with the Department of Education and Skills policy of phasing out of segregated Traveller provision, elements of the support provisions, access, participation and outcomes remain key priority challenges.

While many schools, including those in the ETB sector have access to a range of supports including those specifically under the General Allocation Model for Special Education Needs, these supports need to go beyond this model. Supports and resources, particularly those which align to the principles and practice of intercultural education and subsequently extend to initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning and development, are vital.

At Further Education and Training (FET) level, the delivery of Education and Training Boards is guided by the SOLAS FET Strategy (2014-2019). 'Active Inclusion' is a key element of the Strategy with the FET sector seeking to increase levels through the provision of high-quality, more accessible and flexible education, training and skill development interventions and supports suited to the individual.

In the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation members of the Travelling Community have been identified as a priority group, benefitting from assistance in helping members to acquire a broader set of skills. Tuition is offered on a full or part time basis, with flexible options offered in relation to time, duration and location. At this level tutors and support personnel involved in the provision of direct tuition and aligned support and guidance, can themselves avail of ongoing professional development, including diversity training.

Our written submission referenced current figures relating to Traveller participation in ETB Further Education and Training Programmes. While the data is based on self-disclosure of ethnicity and may not be fully reflective of all Traveller Participation, it does give some indication of participation levels to date. The National Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) records information on learners enrolled in ETB programmes. The data indicates that Youthreach participation in particular presents an attractive option for young adult members of the Traveller Community.

Barriers to participation in Further Education and Training are documented in the SOLAS report of 2017 and some of those noted – low confidence and self-esteem, negative experience of education and lack of awareness are evident in, but not exclusive to the Traveller Community.

ETBI has noted that a revised Strategy on Traveller Education needs to be cognisant of the cultural, specific and organic nature of school and societal environments relating to traveller inclusion and we have made several proposals and recommendations aligned to these priorities in our written submission.

In conclusion, we would like to thank you for inviting ETBI to engage with the Committee on these issues and affording us the opportunity to reflect the varying impacts and experiences of the ETB sector.