

First of all, I would like to thank the Committee for inviting Barnardos here today to provide evidence on this important topic.

Last year Barnardos supported almost 18,000 children and their families.

We work with families to help them address issues affecting children's development and wellbeing, including their ability to take part in learning. Over one third of children benefitting from our targeted family support were aged 11-18.

A significant proportion of our referrals come directly from schools who believe students could benefit from our support. We work alongside schools and teaching staff to help enable young people to engage effectively with education.

The children we support are often living in complex and frequently chaotic circumstances, affected by traumatic life situations such as poverty, abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation and parental addiction. Additionally, they may have added responsibilities such as caring for siblings or indeed, as young parents, caring for their own children.

These challenges can make it more difficult for young people to partake in the Leaving Cert to their full potential. They may find concentrating on schoolwork to be difficult at times when their home environment might be particularly chaotic. They may not have the time or resources necessary to study after school or have access to an appropriate environment in which to do so, living in cramped and overcrowded accommodation. Their families may be struggling to afford materials necessary for young people to study and partake in the Leaving Cert such as textbooks and digital items.

Education is a primary route out of disadvantage. Completing the Leaving Cert can be highly predictive of individual life-chances in Ireland, for example future levels of income, risk of unemployment and homelessness. Children who leave school before completing the Leaving Cert are almost five times more likely to be unemployed in their 20s and 30s and research has found that they are 2.4 times more likely to say that their general health is poor or fair.¹

Children from more disadvantaged and less affluent communities on average do less well in the Leaving Cert. 58% of students from higher professional backgrounds achieve four or more 'honours' in the Leaving Cert compared to 16% of those from semi and unskilled manual backgrounds.²

Our staff work directly with families and teachers to deliver plans to help children engage more with education, including the Leaving Cert, taking account of their individual circumstances, behavioural and emotional issues and specific needs. We support families to build routines to help children engage more with school as well as address additional practical issues, such as struggles to get to and from school or accessing specific educational items, that might be impairing their ability to learn.

We provide a specific service supporting teen parents in education in Finglas, Tallaght, Waterford and Wexford. We understand the barriers these young parents face to remain in school. Our staff provide emotional and practical support through the funding of childcare costs, fees, travel expenses, purchase laptops and other educational resources. We have first-hand evidence of the positive outcomes this direct support has on young parents and their children.

¹ Leaving School in Ireland: A Longitudinal Study of Post-School Transitions

² Investing in Educations: Combatting Educational Disadvantage [ESRI PRS Cover WEB \(sdpi.ie\)](https://www.esri.ie/PRS/CoverWEB/sdpi.ie)

Children with stable backgrounds with expectations to proceed to third level, with emotionally, educationally and financially supportive backgrounds and parents appear to achieve better outcomes within the leaving cert framework in comparison to children who lack such supports. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are not on the same playing field. If they are struggling, they have less financial opportunities for support such as private tutoring and do not have the same access to areas conducive to study. 90-100% of school leavers in affluent areas go to college. In areas of socio-economic disadvantage, the average is 26%.³

A reformed Leaving Cert should provide a broader range of subjects with less emphasis on learning by wrought. There should be a greater focus on practical and technical skill development. It would help broaden future employment and development opportunities for all students.

The Leaving Cert must be reformed to better engage disadvantaged young people and improve their outcomes. It is vital that these young people and their parents are directly consulted in relation to any possible reform.

³ [Levelling the field for entry to college - Independent.ie](http://www.independent.ie)