

Meeting of the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community

18 April 2024 | Opening statement of Ian McDonagh

My name is Ian McDonagh. I am 22 years old. It is my honour to be here today to speak about my views of education within Ireland as a young Traveller who completed Post Primary education to Leaving Certificate and continued to study mortuary science at The Irish College of Funeral Directing and Embalming (ICFDE). I am currently Ireland's first-ever Traveller Funeral Director and Embalmer a title I hope to bring to other members of the Traveller Community in the years to come.

In January 2016, I became the first Traveller to take part and to win an award at the BT Young Scientists Exhibition, winning 2nd prize in the Biological & Ecological Category. My project was titled "Does the lunar cycle play a role in equine birth patterns?"

In January 2017, entering the BT Young Scientist Exhibition for a second consecutive year I won the prestigious Jack Restan award with my project focused on "Cures and Folklore of the Irish Traveller Community".

Since the age of 12, I have been deeply involved in making my local area a safer and better place to live in Galway City, having speed ramps installed in my housing estate and numerous green areas improved upon

This was my initial taste of politics and once that has given me a lifeline passion and interest. I hope in the coming years that I will further pursue this passion and become a member of this government to give the people of Galway West and those from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds the voice that they need at the decision-making Table. I am exceptionally proud to be a member of the Irish Traveller Community. As a community that was officially recognised as an ethnic minority in 2017, I hope this recognition will enable Traveller's young and old to feel proud of their identity and culture. Since the recognition as an ethnic minority a great amount of work and discussion has taken place surrounding the teaching of Traveller history, language, and culture in schools both Primary and Secondary, while this still must be enacted, I do hope it will bring about positive changes for the future of the Traveller Community, especially in the fields of education and employment. We need to see Travellers in greater roles, Traveller Teachers, Traveller Gardai, Traveller Politicians, Traveller Accountants, Nurses, and Doctors. The Traveller Community is full of innovative minds and motivated and hardworking people who giving the correct advice, direction and chance in education and the ability to start believing in themselves will do great things for our country. Unfortunately, currently, the educational landscape in Ireland has many hurdles in place that make it exceptionally difficult for minority and disadvantaged groups to climb.

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As you may be aware statistics detailed in census reports show that

- 13% of Traveller children complete second-level education compared to 92% in the general population.
- Of those Travellers who drop out of second-level education, 55% have left by the age of 15.
- The number of Traveller children who progress to third-level education represents just 1% of the Traveller community.
- 70% of the Traveller Community have only primary level or lower education.

These statistics are shocking, and we must ask ourselves as a society why? And how can we improve these statistics?

I had the great honour of being part of a great education team within the Galway Traveller movement last year. I worked as a peer-led education worker in a post-primary school in Galway City. The education team and I set up a Diversity Hub within the post-primary school specifically aimed at enhancing school life for Traveller Students. Simple actions like being available to help with homework or assignments or even to provide much-needed computer, Wi-Fi and ICT for Traveller students who are resident on halting sites meant students were able to complete schoolwork without embarrassment or worry. Unfortunately, due to lack of funding or investment in a peer-led service, we were not able to expand this offering as was so greatly needed and is still needed.

For me, education is exceptionally important. I see it as the foundation that you can build and grow from. It builds self-confidence, awareness, and an ability to participate actively in our society. It gives a person options and choices that are not ordinarily available to them. Without my education, I would not be standing here. I would not be able give this speech in confidence and have the awareness and understanding of the education sector in Ireland.

Low levels of education lead to poor self-esteem, poor job opportunities, and poor health and can also lead to depression and as we know too well in the Traveller Community it can lead to exceptionally high rates of suicide.

To briefly conclude, I feel that parents need to encourage their children to progress through education and gain at least a Leaving Certificate. More importantly, I urge School Principals, Teachers, SNA's and the Department of Education to take active measures to truly understand minority and disadvantaged groups and the barriers faced in education and together with parents plan to overcome these barriers which in turn will increase participation at both 2nd and 3rd level and provide much needed opportunities for members of the Traveller Community.